

## Ancient and Noble Houses

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## Ancient and Noble Houses

by [Lomonaaren](#)

### Summary

Harry finds out that being the Black heir means far more than just inheriting some money and property. Even with Draco Malfoy's help, the chance that Harry can escape the consequences seems slim. Updated every Friday and Saturday; very short chapters.

### Notes

This story came from me wondering about what the *houses* part of "Ancient and Noble Houses" might mean. This story will be updated every Friday and Saturday afternoon/evening.

## Strange Shadows

Harry leaned in towards the mirror and frowned at himself. Granted, the mirror was in what had once been Sirius's room, which meant it was ancient, dirty, and fly-specked, and not even a Cleaning Charm cast directly at the glass would help much.

But it did look as though he had *changed*, somehow. Harry ran a self-conscious hand down his face and through his hair.

His face looked thinner and paler than it had since he moved into Grimmauld Place for the summer before he returned to Hogwarts. And was his hair thicker and darker?

After a few cautious stares, Harry snorted and stepped back, shaking his head. No, he was probably imagining things. Besides, if there was a way to make his hair more manageable instead of the werewolf's lair it resembled normally, he ought to welcome that.

He turned away from the mirror and cast another Cleaning Charm at the cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling. There was so much accumulated dirt and grime here that normal spells wouldn't take at first application. Harry had to cast them as powerfully as he could, and concentrated, in layers on top of each other. The cobwebs he'd aimed at this time shivered and shriveled, hanging in long black strands that a Severing Charm made puff into dust.

Harry lowered his wand from that and turned around swiftly. He'd thought he'd seen something, either a shadow coming into the room behind him or one moving in the mirror. If there *was* a shadow in the mirror, he had no problem getting rid of it. In Sirius's room or not, Harry doubted it had any sentimental value for him.

But there was no shadow when he looked. Harry rolled one shoulder and snorted to himself again. Hermione would say that he was getting paranoid, living by himself and in a house that still seemed to hold the ghosts of house-elf heads, even though there was only one elf in it now, and he came and went between Grimmauld Place and Hogwarts all the time.

Harry sauntered out of Sirius's room. One of the things that Kreacher usually brought with him when he came in the morning was lunch, and Harry was hungry enough from all the spellcasting to need a big one.

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Harry woke with a start from his doze in front of the fireplace in the main drawing room, and leaped to his feet with his wand drawn. He *knew* he wasn't imagining it this time, the shadow that ran around the corners of the room and up the floor, as though someone was rolling up a Muggle blind on an opposing window.

And this shadow stayed, instead of running away. It coiled in the corner of the floor and leaned against the wall, watching him. Harry bit his lip and stared when he realized how much like a snake it looked.

Despite himself, and what he knew was there, he checked over his shoulder. No snake. No snake to cast it, no snake to take it away.

When he turned around again, the shadow had moved closer, leaping from the wall to a place on a bookshelf where the firelight fell and provided illumination for it to take advantage of. Harry snarled and raised his wand. There was a charm in the back of his mind, one that Hermione had told him about when they were on the Horcrux hunt. She'd thought Voldemort might conjure creatures of pure shadow and set them on their trail. They were notoriously difficult to kill, since any strike would pass straight through their "bodies." But they could still hurt someone, and report back.

There was one spell that would work, though.

"*Iubar!*" Harry cried, and the radiance that leaped from his wand sent every shadow scrambling from the corners of the room, leaving it fully illuminated.

The snake shadow writhed in the middle of the attack for a second, before it withered like the cobwebs earlier that day. Unlike them, it left no physical residue behind. Harry walked over to the bookshelf and prodded the place where it had been with his wand, just to make sure. The shelf felt like ordinary wood.

Harry shook his head. He would have to tell Ron and Hermione about this tomorrow, and ask them for their help. He had no idea who might be sending shadows into his house, or why they would want to. Sure, there were Death Eaters still abroad, but Harry thought he knew all his remaining enemies fairly well, and none of them were the kind who would send shadows into the house to spy on him. If they knew where he was, and could somehow find a way around the renewed Fidelius Charm that Harry had cast on the house, then they'd just attack. No point in dancing around the issue.

Unless they wanted to drive him mad, maybe.

Harry thought about that, then shook his head again. No one left would have the patience for that kind of plan, either. Fenrir Greyback was still out there, but he was less subtle than any of them. Rodolphus Lestranger had escaped, too, along with Rabastan, but both of them had been driven more than slightly insane by Azkaban. No, he couldn't see them forcing a way into his house with this kind of spell.

Nor could he see one of them forcing Hermione to hand over the secret of his house's location, or Ron. Ron and Hermione traded the secret back and forth on random days, and not even Harry usually knew which one of them had the Secret-Keeper position at any one moment.

"No, I'll ask Hermione about it tomorrow," Harry whispered, and turned and walked up the stairs. He hated sleeping in front of the fire in the drawing room, anyway. He inevitably woke up with a crick in his neck. He would be better served going to bed and contacting Hermione in the morning.

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Harry woke up to a heavy weight on his chest. The first thing he thought, before he opened his eyes, was that Kreacher had brought up a breakfast tray and left it there. He'd done that, more than once, before Harry's shouting made it clear that he didn't enjoy being awakened by having his lungs compressed.

But this was a book, instead. Harry picked it up and turned it around, staring at it. He'd taken books from the Black library, of course, and left them piled on the desk by his bed. One of them

could have fallen on top of him.

But not *Secrets of the Darkest Art*. Not that one. Harry not only wouldn't have wanted to read it, he hadn't even known that a copy of it resided in the house library.

Harry swallowed and sat up, glancing at the desk next to his bed as he did. All the books piled there seemed to have something to do with the Dark Arts—and Harry hadn't removed any of them from the library, though he remembered seeing a few of them there.

He turned back, and the snake shadow was coiled at the base of his door. It bowed its head towards him and hissed before it faded.

The hiss had been a greeting, Harry realized numbly. In Parseltongue. "*Hail, master.*"

Except he hadn't used Parseltongue since the fall of Voldemort, and hadn't even realized he still understood it. He had assumed Voldemort's powers would fade with the bit of Horcrux that had died.

Sweating, Harry threw back his blankets and the book and bolted for his dresser to retrieve some clean clothes. He wanted to contact Hermione, and even though it was early in the morning and most people in the Burrow would probably still be asleep, he would take the chance of waking them up.

He needed *help*. He was starting to think that either he was doing this in his sleep, or the house was somehow doing it to him.

Or else Voldemort was back, or not as gone as Harry had thought.

Either way, Harry needed his friends to face the possibility.

## Shadows in the Soul

“I don’t know, Harry.” Hermione’s voice was soft as she looked at him out of the fire. “Do you want me to come over?”

Harry closed his eyes and rested his hands on his knees, forcing himself to think about that question rationally. If Hermione came over, then he could speak to her more naturally, and show her the books, and the place where the shadow had been. Maybe she would know charms that could help protect him.

But now, talking it over with someone else, he had to wonder just how rational he was being. The books were the only thing he couldn’t really explain. The shadow in the mirror and the way he’d thought his looks had changed were probably only imagination, the way Hermione had suggested they were. And the serpent shadow was probably a manifestation of a Dark artifact he hadn’t found in the house yet, not a sign of Voldemort.

*But what about the way the serpent shadow called you “master?”*

Harry had to shake his head. Really, the reason he was conflicted about having Hermione come over was that he would have to clean up the house if she did, and he was happy with the comfortable mess it was currently in, where he could remove some of the grime of centuries when he felt like it, and leave dishes in the kitchen for Kreacher to wash up, and let his clothes lie on the floor where they fell.

“Harry?”

*Hermione, right.* Harry opened his eyes. “You’ve reassured me it’s probably not Voldemort,” he said, with a faint smile. “Why don’t we leave it alone for today and see what happens? If the snake comes back, I mean? That’s the thing that scared me the most.”

“Not the books appearing next to your bed?” Hermione asked. “That would frighten *me*.”

“That’s because you know where your books are at all times,” Harry pointed out.

“The world would be better if more people lived like that.”

Harry snorted and rolled his eyes. “Of course it would, Hermione. Meanwhile, I still don’t know what the purpose of that shadow was, or what’s going to happen. I’ve been living here for a month, and these things just started happening. What if—well, what if they’re just more of the house’s defenses and I’m getting upset over nothing? I didn’t even ask Kreacher about them. I should.”

“House-elves know a lot more than most people think about the way houses behave,” Hermione began. “It’s even in their *name*...”

Harry nodded absently through most of the resulting lecture, his thoughts on Kreacher. He hadn’t seen Kreacher this morning, now that he thought about it. Of course, Kreacher spent a lot of time at Hogwarts with Winky, and it wasn’t really unusual for him not to be around unless Harry wanted him for something.

“Kreacher!” he called, interrupting Hermione. She put up with it, rolling her eyes.

Kreacher appeared beside him after a slight hesitation, and stared at Harry. Then he bowed to the floor, his ears scraping the wood, his hands folded in front of him in a way Harry had never seen before. “What can Kreacher be doing for Master Harry?” he whispered, his voice hoarse.

“Tell me why you’re treating me this way,” Harry snapped, and folded his arms. “You looked at me as though—as though I was a stranger. And there are shadows in the house hissing at me and calling me master, and books moving around and putting themselves where they shouldn’t be, and shadows in mirrors, and—do I *look* different?” He turned to Hermione. “Do you think I look different?”

Hermione studied him, and then shook her head. “Maybe a little pale from not going out in the sun?” she offered. “That’s it.”

“Master Harry is becoming *master*.”

The tone in Kreacher’s voice made Harry turn quickly back towards him. Kreacher was studying him in a way that made Harry think *greedy*, but then Kreacher bowed and looked back down at the floor, so quickly that it was hard to tell.

“What does that mean?” Harry demanded. “Tell me what that means *right now*.”

“It means that Master Harry is coming to fit the house,” Kreacher said, blinking up at him. “Master Harry is being more comfortable here, and fitting it.” He clapped one hand to his forehead suddenly. “Kreacher is not getting Master Harry his breakfast! Kreacher is to be fixing this right now!”

He ran away, and Harry heard the banging of pots and pans a moment later. He exchanged a baffled glance with Hermione, who was chewing her lip. “That wasn’t the way he’s been acting since the war, was it?” Harry asked. “Or am I just being paranoid?”

“No, I don’t think it is,” Hermione whispered. “He seemed glad about something, but what that was...” She trailed off, frowning into the distance. “I need to do some research about house-elves,” she said, so suddenly that Harry jumped. “I read something about this months ago, but I don’t remember what book it was in.”

“*You* don’t remember what *book* it was in?” Harry asked.

Hermione scowled at him. “I’ll let you know when I find something,” she said, and disappeared from the fireplace.

Harry looked around the room, filled with dancing shadows since the fire was still lit, and shivered. Then he drew his wand and murmured a charm that would splay out all the shadows flat on the floor. It was really supposed to be used to tell whether one of your enemies was hiding in a dark corner, but Harry was more interested in the shape of the shadows right now.

None of them resembled a serpent. Harry stifled a sigh and turned towards the kitchen—

Only to stop when he saw that one of the shadows did look like that, after all. It seemed to have a long flat head and a huge coiled body, like a python. It lay across the threshold of the kitchen, barring his way.

Harry swallowed, but there wasn't any spit in his throat to ease the transition. He ended up pressing backwards, his hands flattened on the walls, panting so hard that he thought he was going to pass out. The shadow remained still, and Harry could still hear Kreacher working in the kitchen as though everything was normal, but it was very much *not*.

It seemed, after five or ten minutes of that—the time seemed to stretch and pass hazily around him in the midst of his terror, so Harry really wasn't sure—that Harry firmed his backbone and decided there was only one way to deal with this. Even if Kreacher had come out of the kitchen, Harry wasn't sure that he could banish the shadow.

“*Go away*,” he hissed in Parseltongue.

The snake immediately rose up, a long, long pulse of shadow, two meters at least, off the floor. For a moment, a smaller piece of shadow seemed to detach itself from the rest, and Harry recognized the flickering of a forked tongue. The snake ducked its head and slithered away from him, towards the staircase. Even as Harry turned to stare after it, the shadow blended with the shadow of the stairs, until he could no longer tell the difference.

Harry turned back and walked mechanically into the kitchen, where he sat down on a chair with a thump and stared at the wall. He ended up jumping when his food appeared in front of him.

“Master Harry is beings tired?” Kreacher looked at him, ducking his head a little when Harry tried to look back. It seemed as though he was trying to hide his eyes under his ear-hair. Harry opened his mouth to reply, and had to pause again when he realized that the motion looked like the way the snake had ducked its head.

Maybe not just a duck. Maybe a bow.

“What do you know about the history of the house, Kreacher?” Harry asked slowly, stirring his spoon through his cornflakes. “Are there books here about the history of the Black family? And the history of Parseltongue?” He still didn't know why the shadows looked like snakes, but maybe that was only happening because he was a Parselmouth, and someone else would see different things.

Kreacher jerked, and his ears flapped. “Master Harry is wanting to know the history of the Blacks?” he asked eagerly.

Harry stared at him for a second. Kreacher was almost hovering off the floor, his fingers clasped and a blissful expression on his face.

“Well, yes,” Harry said at last. He wanted to go on and explain about the snake shadows and why he wanted to know about them, but Kreacher was already backing away, beaming and bowing and wringing his hands.

“Master Harry is to be saying no more.” One of Kreacher's eyes closed in a great, sly wink that was as disturbing as some of the expressions on Bellatrix's face. “Kreacher is finding them for Master.”

Kreacher vanished, and left Harry blinking at the spot where he had been. There had been a dark light in his eyes, Harry thought numbly for a moment, the way he had looked when he cuddled some Black artifact to his chest or chuckled over its existence to himself.

Then Harry shook his head sharply and turned back to his breakfast. No, that wasn't true. He was imagining things. Kreacher was a thoroughly reformed house-elf. He didn't even call Hermione by that horrible name now, and he didn't hide away in corners, and he didn't try to attack people who weren't attacking him.

The curl of coolness up his spine was more likely due to the snake shadows and what it would mean if part of Voldemort's soul still lived inside him. That was his real problem, and the sooner he could solve it, the better.



## History of the Blacks

“All these?” Harry’s voice was faint as he surveyed the stack of books that Kreacher had brought him.

“All these.” Kreacher bowed his head and gave Harry that sidelong glance again, the one so quick Harry kept thinking he hadn’t really seen it. “Master.”

“Could you call me Harry?” Harry whined, picking up the first book and studying it. It said *The Blacks and Their Heirs*, and it didn’t seem to have an author. It was an enormous book, blue with golden letters stamped on the spine for the title. He grimaced and put it back on the pile. He was in the drawing room again, the place where he had seen the cobra-shadow, and Kreacher pulled some more tomes from the bookshelves and brought them over.

“Master,” Kreacher said, and Harry didn’t know whether that was a response or a refusal. “Here are more books that Master be requesting.” He bowed his head in what at least looked like humility and tumbled the books onto the table in front of Harry.

Then he bowed deeply again, and kept it like that until Harry waved a hand at him. “You can go now, Kreacher.”

“Kreacher is happy to have served Master.” Kreacher stood up and gave Harry a look so deep that Harry flinched away from it. Then he turned and loped into the kitchen, and Harry heard pots banging and clanging again.

Left alone, Harry stared at the books and decided that he might as well start with *The Blacks and Their Heirs*, even though it was no longer the one on the top of the pile. He flipped a page open and started to read.

Once he thought he saw a shadow writhing next to him, settling near his feet, but nothing actually touched him, and he managed to grit his teeth and ignore it.

\*

*Well, that was a load of bollocks that didn’t actually help much.*

Harry sat at the kitchen table eating the dinner Kreacher had prepared for him, which seemed heavy on tomatoes, and there was an enormous plate of treacle tart for afters. Harry had probably told Kreacher at some point that he liked those things, but he couldn’t remember when.

The books had said that Black heirs were traditionally chosen for their blood. No help there. The books had said that Black heirs also learned the traditions of the house from their parents and that there was no reason for them to grow up anywhere but in the building that was the current head of the family’s home. So for a few generations back that had been Grimmauld Place—no mention as to why the Blacks had wanted to move into the middle of a Muggle city—and for a while before that it had been a place called Midnight Manor, and there had been houses further back that didn’t seem to have names. The names were “buried with their owners,” whatever the fuck that meant.

Black heirs had honor and pride and tradition and pure blood and cunning and ambition. Since

none of those seemed to apply to him, Harry had no idea why Kreacher was treating him the way he was.

Black heirs shared the family traits of pale skin and grey eyes and dark hair, and the eldest son was normally the heir, followed by a younger son, and then an elder daughter. A few of the books seemed to imply that if there were three sons, an elder daughter was still preferred, but hadn't explained why. It was only mildly interesting anyway.

"The House makes the heir," the second book had concluded. Harry rubbed his hand over his face and tried not to growl. So what? Yes, that would make sense if he was *actually a member* of the House of Black, but he wasn't, and Sirius leaving him the property and vaults and Kreacher couldn't actually make him one.

"Is Master wanting to go into the garden?"

Harry glanced up. "Huh?" He hadn't got around to cleaning up the garden behind the house yet, for a number of reasons relating to the facts that there was plenty of work inside, that someone might see him there, and that he had no interest in the Potions ingredients the garden seemed mostly designed to grow.

"Master is wanting to go into the garden," Kreacher said, nodding wisely, and bustled along in front of Harry to gather up the plates. "The garden is often soothing the Black heirs. Master is wanting to go into the garden." He looked so keenly at Harry that Harry stood up and turned around because it seemed like a good idea to be as far away as possible from someone who looked at him like that.

"Yes, fine," Harry said, and strolled outside. It *was* a stroll, he told himself, not a march. Or a run.

It was actually a more pleasant evening in the garden than he'd thought it was, cool and grey but with a hint of blue peeking through the clouds, and the ground not as muddy as it should have been with all the rain. Harry wandered from one dim and overgrown flowerbed to another, and sometimes identified plants that he had learned about in Herbology, but mostly just thought to himself.

His thoughts tumbled around each other chaotically, but at least he wasn't brooding as much as he would have in the house.

He was passing a thicket running wild with vines and trailing red flowers when a low growl startled him. Harry turned around with a hand on his wand, wondering what could be out here. The wards kept out most Muggle pests, and Kreacher rooted out the rare magical creatures who could make it past.

A Kneazle stepped into view, or at least Harry thought it was one. He had never seen one that was white with silver stripes, or such ragged ears, as if it got into a lot of fights. It stared at Harry and pulled its lips back from its teeth for another long growl, rising into a wail.

Harry frowned, and wondered who had a Kneazle like that near here, and how it would have got into the garden if it was feral. He knelt and held out a hand. "Here, here," he said, and then paused, because he didn't have a name to call it and it seemed stupid to use "kitty, kitty," like it was a Muggle cat.

The Kneazle's lips pulled further back, and it spat so hard that Harry thought it would knock itself

over. Then it flattened itself to the ground, spat one more time, and sprang at him.

Harry rolled back the way he would from an offensive curse. The Kneazle missed, but Harry heard the way its paws slammed into the dirt, and looked back in time to see it lifting them. Long claws gleamed there, curved like hooks.

Harry stood up, and the Kneazle sprang at him again. Harry kicked out with one leg. He managed to hit the animal in the side, and it flew into the same patch of flowers it had emerged from. Harry, panting, opened his mouth to call Kreacher for help.

But it came flying out again, so quickly that Harry wondered for an absurd instant if it had a trampoline in there, and aimed for his throat.

Harry raised his wand, but he hadn't got the incantation for the Shield Charm fully out before the Kneazle knocked into him and bore him to the ground. It was a heavier blow than Harry had thought so small an animal could make. Its body seemed to be made of silver and compacted bone, iron and steel.

And the claws that hooked into his throat, followed by the teeth, were certainly iron.

Harry stuck his wand into its body and tried to fling it off him with the Blasting Curse, but nothing happened. He couldn't get any breath behind the incantation, not with the Kneazle savaging his throat.

*I could die here*, he thought, with a hard, painful clarity that hurt more than the claws digging into his skin. *I could survive Voldemort and then die here because a stupid Kneazle killed me.*

The thought was so ridiculous that it flowed down his body in a furious wave of rejection. He pushed himself straight up into the air and stuck his wand deep into the cat's body and bellowed a spell that rode the wave of his anger. "*Cordis fulgor!*"

The Kneazle's body arched, spasmed, and kicked. In a few seconds it slipped off his chest, and although Harry winced at its going because its claws dug into his skin and ripped it, it was clear the thing was dead.

Harry swallowed and touched his throat. Only lacerations, he thought. He'd survive.

He wondered why the house would attack him with a silvery Kneazle, or why the enemies sending the snake shadows would. And then he wondered where he had learned a spell that would send a bolt of lightning to a creature's heart. It certainly wasn't the kind of thing that he would have found in his Defense books.

Kreacher appeared silently. Harry stared at him, wondering if he had come to offer some sort of healing potion for Harry's throat.

Instead, Kreacher nodded to Harry, picked up the Kneazle by its tail, and slung it casually over his shoulder. "Kreacher is to be hanging Master's first kill," he announced. "Kreacher will be returning."

He vanished, leaving Harry kneeling in the midst of a small pool of his own blood, and a much larger pool of his own horror.



## Lightning to the Heart

“And that’s all that happened?” Hermione’s eyes were big in the fire as she stared at him.

“I swear, that’s all that happened.” Harry sat back, flinching a little as he touched the cuts and slashes on his throat. Kreacher had indeed brought him a healing potion for them, but they still looked pretty bad. Hermione’s first gaze when she saw him had been horrified. “You think I go around killing Kneazles for fun?”

“No.” Hermione’s voice was soft. She nibbled her lip for a second, and then said, “I think that maybe other things happened. Did you notice anyone in the house? Any other snake shadows before you went outside?”

“I thought I saw one,” Harry said reluctantly, remembering the shadow that might have curled up next to his foot when he was reading. “But I didn’t look directly at it, so I don’t know.”

“Oh, Harry.” Hermione frowned at him. “You can’t make a problem go away by pretending it doesn’t exist.”

“I know that,” Harry said, and controlled the urge to snap at her. The same undirected rage that had filled him when the Kneazle began to bite his throat and he realized he could die in this filthy old house’s back garden was inside him now, bubbling so thickly that he had to be careful it didn’t come out on top of people who didn’t deserve it, like his friends. “But what else was I supposed to do? I can’t make the shadows do what I want anyway.”

“You can’t command them in Parseltongue?” Hermione was watching him closely.

Harry really flinched this time. Then he sighed and said, “Maybe I can. But I don’t want to acknowledge them. That just feels like—like giving whatever is here and wants me to pay attention to it more control over me.”

Hermione’s brows drew together as she thought. “You think it’s something in the house, then? Not something a Death Eater or Voldemort is doing?”

Harry shook his head firmly. “I did try reading some books on the history of the Black family, though, to see if they would give me anything. But they didn’t.”

“I can look some more,” Hermione offered. “What I’ve found so far says that it’s not unusual for family members in the pure-blood houses to repeat the same traditions and ideals and names and actions over and over again. But—”

“I’m not a Black family member by blood,” Harry finished with a sigh. “Or, at least, I’m not as close as people like Sirius or Narcissa Malfoy or Draco Malfoy.” He hesitated. “Do you think this would all go away if I signed the property and the vaults over to the Malfoys?”

Hermione sat up straighter. “But you said you liked living in Grimmauld Place,” she said. “You liked having a private place, and a place that would give you lots of occupation cleaning it up, and —”

“Yeah, but...” Harry said, and trailed off. It was true that he didn’t have much foundation for the unease that crept and slid through him like one of the snake shadows. Just like he didn’t have much foundation for the rage that had overcome him, or the spell he had used to kill the Kneazle.

“I wouldn’t give it to Malfoy,” Hermione said firmly. “You don’t know everything about what’s happening yet. Hell, maybe he’s even the one sending you these shadows and visions, so that you would get out of the house and he could have it.”

“Maybe,” Harry muttered, and kept to himself that he didn’t think Malfoy was that accomplished a wizard. He had last seen the git during the flurry of Death Eater trials in May, and although Malfoy had been allowed to go free, a restriction had been placed on his wand that meant he couldn’t cast any spells more complex than ones taught in the fourth year at Hogwarts. “But keep looking, can you? Can you look up silvery Kneazles now? I’m going to ask Kreacher to bring me books. As soon as he comes back from whatever he’s doing now,” Harry added, turning around to stare up the steps. Kreacher had vanished again the instant after he brought Harry the healing potions.

“I’ll look, of course,” Hermione promised. “And be careful, Harry. Call us again if you need us.”

Harry gave her a wan smile and let the Floo connection go, then sat there with his arms coiled around himself, resolutely not turning his head towards the stairs. He had thought he’d seen another shadow there, although this one was shaped like a cat rather than a snake. He clutched his wand, though. Another Kneazle springing out on him wouldn’t find him such an easy victim.

“Master wishes to see his trophy?”

Harry started and spun around to face Kreacher. Kreacher promptly bowed low enough to hide his face. “Master was wishing information on the Black family,” he whispered. “The trophy room is being a good place.”

Although Harry’s spine crawled with the certainty that Kreacher was probably going to show him the place where he had put all the house-elf heads that used to hang on the walls, he managed to nod and stand. “Show me, then.”

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“The trophy room, Master.”

Harry still wasn’t sure why he had never seen the door that Kreacher had shown him before. It was under the stairs going up to the first floor, like his cupboard, but Harry had walked past that wall a hundred times and never seen it. And it was a squat little grey-and-black door, made of some wood that looked as though it was diseased, but that wouldn’t have kept Harry from noticing it, as brightly lit as he kept the place now.

Yet somehow it was there, and Harry stepped past it, and found himself in a huge, round room that had to be magical somehow, since it could never have fit onto the ground floor of Grimmauld Place as Harry knew it, let alone under the stairs.

On one wall were indeed the house-elf heads Kreacher had removed. Harry shuddered a little and faced the other one.

There were large plaques of wood fastened there, wood that had the same fungus problem as the door did. In the exact center of each one was mounted a head, all perfectly preserved. Harry could

feel the magic humming in the room and thought it was the same sort of charms he had felt in the library.

There was a huge cat of some sort, and a crocodile, and a snake, and a lion, and a deer that looked alive enough to spring off the wall. And there was more than one human head. Muggles, Harry was certain. He had to turn away from them faster than he'd turned away from the house-elves, which he'd at least expected to see.

And then there were two blank pieces of wood, and one, the last in the row, with the Kneazle's head nailed firmly upon it. Harry scowled at the blank pieces, resolutely keeping his eyes away from the Kneazle, too. "What are those, Kreacher?"

"Pieces of wood of heirs who not be using them," Kreacher said, and sniffed at them. "Master Sirius Black would not be staying long enough to become heir and make his kill. And Master Regulus not be having his chance." Kreacher's head sank.

"His kill," Harry said, and paced in a circle around the room, trying to look only at the heads of animals, minus the silver Kneazle. Now that he looked at them in detail, he realized that all of them were *different* from ordinary animals in some way, although not always in color, the way the Kneazle had been. The lion had a bright red mane. The snake, a cobra, had a pattern of two interlocking triangles on its flared hood. The deer had a single antler directly in the middle of its forehead. "What do you mean? What are the kills? What do they have to do with the Black heirs?"

Kreacher was silent. Harry turned around to face him, and found him wiping away tears. Harry grimaced. "Sorry," he muttered.

"It is being nothing." Kreacher sniffled and used the back of his hand to wipe his nose, which Harry had to look away from. "It is simply that—that each Black heir be making a kill to show that he be accepting responsibility for life and death, and Kreacher was thinking that he would never see a Black heir again. Kreacher is so proud of Master!" And he ran forwards and embraced Harry's legs.

Harry reached down and pried him off, feeling as though *this* grimace would cut permanent lines in his face. "But where did the Kneazle come from? How did it get into the garden?" He thought of asking why he'd had to kill it, but that had a simple answer. Because it had been trying to kill him.

Kreacher sniffled and looked up with large, damp eyes. "The house is creating the kills for each Black heir when they are being ready."

Harry took a step backwards, although Kreacher holding onto him made him stumble, and he had to brace himself against the wall. "You knew there would be something waiting in the garden for me," he whispered. "That's why you told me I should go outside."

Kreacher nodded. "But Kreacher was not sure if Master would be making the kill. Kreacher is *so proud!*" Again he hugged Harry's legs.

Harry pried his hands off and fled out the door, not caring about the things Kreacher was trying to tell him as it slammed shut. When he glanced back, though, half-hoping it had been a dream, the diseased-looking door was still there.

*I can't trust Kreacher. I can't trust the shadows. I might have to kill more things if I stay here.*

And that all led to one conclusion. *I have to get out of here right away.*



## Sleek Silver Scars

### Chapter Five—Sleek Silver Scars

“And you’re sure that it wasn’t a dream? Or a trance? Or anything to do with the healing potions you drank?” Hermione’s voice was strained, and she was shivering.

Harry glared at her. “I know you don’t want to think badly of a house-elf, but I know what I saw,” he said. He put down the teacup she’d given him a little harder than was strictly necessary, then flushed and cleared his throat when he saw the way she watched him. “I was awake. I only drank a few healing potions, and the cuts didn’t even heal completely, look.” He stood up and moved his hands away from his throat.

Ron, who’d been listening to the story on the other side of the Burrow’s kitchen table with his mouth open, jumped up. “It looks like you got cut months ago, mate,” he interrupted. “I know that you didn’t have those scars when you went to Grimmauld Place, because I *saw* you, but they look old.”

Harry stared down, but of course he couldn’t really see his own neck. Hermione wordlessly conjured a mirror and passed it across the table to him.

Harry tilted it so that he could see himself. The angle was still awkward, but he could feel the lingering pain, and that guided his hand to the proper place. The scars did look months old, he had to admit. Sleek and silvery and spiral, as though someone had tried to take his head off with a corkscrew. The kind of scars that he might have left on Draco Malfoy’s chest with the *Sectumsempra*.

Harry winced as he thought about that, and put the mirror down, turning to face his friends. “But you believe me about what happened?” he whispered, needing the reassurance, because Hermione’s doubts about Kreacher and the sight of the scars had shaken him so badly. “You believe me?”

“I don’t know what’s going on or what part Kreacher really plays in it, but I believe you,” Hermione said steadily, eyes fixed on him. Her face had gone pale.

Ron walked around the table to clap Harry on the shoulder. “Me, too, mate. But like Hermione, I don’t know what it *means*. Kreacher acted like you had to do this to be the Black heir?”

Harry nodded. “Black heirs had to kill something. You didn’t see that trophy room.” He closed his eyes and tried not to imagine it, either. He had caught only a glimpse of the Muggle heads, but that was enough.

“There’s too much that we don’t understand about this,” Hermione said quietly. “I agree that it wouldn’t be a bad idea for you to stay away from the house for now, and try to learn more about it. Maybe ask the only Blacks you could trust to tell you?” When Harry glared at her, she added, “Narcissa and Draco Malfoy.”

“I’d rather not,” Harry said. “I’m out of there now, and Kreacher can’t do anything to me.”

“But you have to go back to get your clothes and your books and your Invisibility Cloak and all the rest of it,” Ron pointed out helpfully. “Unless you want to leave them there to rot when you go back to Hogwarts. And clothes fall apart when you use Cleaning Charms on them too much, I just want you to know.”

Harry let his head fall forwards to rest in his hands. “Fuck,” he muttered.

“Please don’t say that,” Hermione murmured, with a dignity that Harry had to bite his lip savagely to keep from laughing at. “It annoys me.” She turned to Ron. “I think we should be the ones to fetch his things. Kreacher can’t affect us the way he can Harry.” She glanced over her shoulder at Harry. “And in the meantime, you should write a letter to Draco, or Narcissa. Maybe Narcissa would be better. She probably has more experience of the house than Draco does.”

“But Draco’s the one who owes him a life-debt,” Ron said, who was fond of that fact. “Two, actually. He owes the git’s mum instead of the other way around. Would she really answer his questions?”

“It does *no harm* to ask,” Hermione pointed out, and stood up, brushing soot off her robes. “In the meantime, Ron, you and I have some things to fetch.”

She had already turned towards the fireplace, so Ron rolled his eyes at Harry behind her back and followed. Harry chuckled weakly, and tried to sit there looking as though he intended to write a letter the instant they left.

But the more he thought about it as he sat there, the less inclined he was to actually do it. Why *should* he? He was out of the house now, and he hadn’t seen any of the snake-shaped shadows here, or the cat-shaped one (if it existed), and Kreacher hadn’t shown up to hammer on the Burrow’s wards. The Weasleys made him welcome and didn’t question him as to why he had abandoned his “sanctuary,” as Mrs. Weasley called it. He could stay here for the rest of the summer, and go back to Hogwarts in the autumn, and...

And what? What came after that? Was he going to let the house sit empty for the rest of his life, and then leave it to someone else who wouldn’t know how to cope with the Black heritage, either?

*I’m not going to do that, Harry decided slowly. I’m going to have to deal with it somehow. But not right now. It’s only a few months after the war. I should have some peace before I have to do that.*

And so he stayed there, sipping his tea, and when Ron and Hermione tumbled back out of the fireplace with a couple trunks holding his things, he looked up and smiled. “Did Kreacher give you any trouble?”

Ron dusted soot off his sleeve, frowning. “You weren’t kidding about how dark that house’s got,” he muttered. “We didn’t see the door you were talking about, though.”

“Well, I didn’t see it myself until Kreacher showed it to me, so I didn’t expect you would,” Harry said wryly.

“Kreacher did call me that word,” Hermione said. She had already shed the soot and was setting Harry’s trunk down in the middle of the kitchen, regarding him intently. “Did you send an owl to Malfoy?”

Harry shrugged casually. “Yeah, but I don’t know if he’ll respond. He would probably find it

embarrassing to be reminded that he owes me a life-debt.”

“Two,” Ron said, and grinned at him. “You did remind him it was two, didn’t you?”

While Hermione scolded Ron for caring about that at all, Harry smiled and tried to ignore the churning sickness at the bottom of his stomach that said lying to his best friends about sending off a letter was stupid. It was simple, but so stupid. When Malfoy didn’t write back, then Harry would just say that he obviously couldn’t be bothered to reply to a friendly letter, or a letter pleading for help, and that would be the end of it. Harry couldn’t picture Hermione writing to the Malfoys herself to demand an answer. They’d probably burn her letter in the fireplace anyway, once they realized who it was from.

But the squirming, uncomfortable feeling at the bottom of his stomach remained.

*I can’t do anything else, Harry reassured himself. I don’t want to deal with this right now, and how likely is it that the Malfoys would know anything, anyway? At least, Draco? Kreacher said that Sirius and Regulus both didn’t become heirs, so it’s been at least a generation since anyone was in the situation I’m in. That would be enough time to destroy and lose a lot of knowledge.*

Maybe it was stupid, but he deserved the chance to live the way he wanted to after the war. So he would keep silent for now and only deal with the consequences when they came hunting him.

\*

He slept that night without shadows haunting his bedchamber, and woke up to the soft, delicious smell of food drifting up from the kitchen. Mrs. Weasley’s cooking was better than Kreacher’s, even though Kreacher prepared all the things that Harry liked most. And Harry *still* couldn’t remember telling him that he liked most of those things.

Life in the Burrow was easy, despite Ginny’s longing glances. No one but Ron and Hermione said anything about the old scars on his throat, and he had someone to talk to all the time, keeping him from being lonely or drifting into odd thoughts the way he had at Grimmauld Place. By the time he finished one day there, and was listening to Ron snoring in the bed next to his, he couldn’t believe that he had ever wanted to live for months alone in some grotesque old house.

And if he got flashes of strange emotions sometimes, rage and hatred and the impulse to strike out and destroy something he was looking at, who cared? The grief for Fred in the house around him made other people have odd reactions, too, especially George. Harry controlled them and never hurt anybody or anything.

His life went back to normal, and Kreacher was far from his mind the day that he stepped onto the Hogwarts Express and caught a glimpse of Draco Malfoy staring at him.

## Portrait of a Black Heir

Draco adjusted his cloak in front of the mirror and gave himself a doubtful glance. The mirror was crooning over how handsome he looked, but it had done that the first day he walked back into Malfoy Manor after the trial, pale and haggard and looking like a collection of sticks on a scaffold. Draco knew better than to trust a *mirror's* opinions.

He thought he looked—okay. Certainly much better than he had two months ago, after he was acquitted and his mother acquitted, their wands bound, his father put in prison.

Draco's hand whitened for a second on the shelf beneath the mirror, and then he pushed himself away and shook his head. They were still alive, as his mother said every day the first time she saw him. That meant they could still do things, and the restrictions on their wands would change someday.

Draco stalked out of his bedroom, ignoring the forlorn way the mirror called after him, and down the stairs, and through the twisting maze of corridors that led to the front door. His mother was waiting there herself, standing next to his school trunk as if guarding it, though of course the house-elves had packed it. She watched him and bit her lip, then stepped forwards and spread her arms to enfold him.

Draco allowed it, his head bowed and his eyes on the floor. He expected a little speech about how he would go back to Hogwarts and do the Malfoys proud, or what remained of the Malfoys, and his mother would expect him to perform gracefully, calmly, to do his duty, even in the company of people who exasperated him or had last been seen testifying against him at the trials.

"Remember that we're alive," Narcissa whispered as she stroked his hair. "From that, everything else follows."

A smile threatened to tremble through Draco's control, but he retained it and nodded. Of course that had to come first.

But then Narcissa's hands tightened on his shoulders, and that surprised Draco enough that he looked up at her. Narcissa's mouth had tightened along with her hands. She nodded at him, and exhaled until Draco thought all the air in her lungs was gone.

"I'm not going to tell you not to resent them," she said quietly. "Especially when it was your father's mistakes that cost you so much, and not yours. There will be people who judge you for being part of this family who would have cowered at your feet or fawned for a scrap of attention a year ago. That's going to be hard to deal with."

Draco covered the flinch he wanted to give, he thought, by standing up and straightening his shoulders. It wasn't a *year* ago, with the Dark Lord stalking through the corridors of the Manor, that he missed. It was the time before that, when he was someone because of his name and growing, he thought, into someone else, someone people would respect or fear on his own and not just because of who his father was.

The time before he knew the truth about the Dark Lord.

“I don’t ask you not to resent them,” his mother repeated, smoothing his cloak collar. “I only ask you not to strike out at them.”

Draco snorted and lifted his wand. “That’s going to be hard when I can’t cast anything more complex than a Summoning Charm,” he said.

“Have you forgotten what a well-placed *Accio* can do, then?” His mother’s voice was as still and deep as one of the ponds near the back of the grounds.

Draco flinched in spite of himself, and lowered his wand. His Aunt Bellatrix had killed one of the expendable Muggleborn prisoners by Summoning a chunk of a chandelier. The grey stains on the walls were worse than the red ones.

“Good,” Narcissa breathed, and took his face in her hands, and kissed him on the brow. Draco closed his eyes. There was that, at least. Even in the worst depths of the war, even in the worst depths after the war, when he sat in a cell at Azkaban awaiting trial, he had never doubted that his mother loved him.

“You could do it,” Narcissa continued. “You could hurt them. But I’m going to ask you not to do it while you’re at Hogwarts. Afterwards, you can concentrate on your vengeance and building a life for yourself. But you need NEWTS to do that, and we need at least a year to make them think we’re harmless and fitting back into the wizarding world. Can you do that?”

Draco swallowed and nodded. He wondered what his mother would say if he told her that he was uninterested in vengeance. That he just wanted to live a normal life and get married and not have people sneer at him and find something to do that would content him for years. Maybe brewing Potions, but a lot of the joy had gone out of the art for him when he realized that Professor Snape was dead.

His mother hugged him, fiercely, and Draco lifted his head for one more kiss. For a moment, Narcissa peered into his eyes as if she could see his future written there like some Seers could supposedly do, and then she hugged him again, hard enough to make Draco cough a little.

“I love you,” she said, and sharpness pricked at Draco’s eyes for a moment before he dismissed it. He had never doubted that, but it was nice to hear once in a while.

“And I love you, too,” Draco whispered, and picked up his trunks with a single flick of his wand before he walked the door. The sharpness would come back and he would weep if he stayed there, and that was *not* acceptable—not to him, even if it was to his mother.

His last sight of his mother was her standing in the doorway of the Manor, hands clasped at the waist of her silvery grey gown.

Then she shut the door gently, and Draco swallowed and took his first steps forwards in two months by himself.

\*

Getting onto the Hogwarts Express was easier than he’d pictured. There were no hateful crowds waiting for him, no one trying to fling stones or rubbish at him, and Draco slipped into one of the compartments and sat down with his eyes closed, trying to calm his breathing and reassure himself that it would *always* be like this, if he just had the courage to make it so. No one would be trying to

make his life miserable.

Frankly, he doubted that anyone cared that much. But with his wand bound and his long residence in the Manor since May, it was hard to convince himself of that.

He kept the door of the compartment open and a mild version of the Notice-Me-Not Charm on himself, not something that would discourage his friends from actively looking for him, but which would keep someone else from glancing casually into that compartment and then trying to taunt him. He wanted to see who came back, and who didn't.

He saw Millicent, stalking through the train like she was waiting to break the first student who challenged her right to be there, and Blaise, face utterly smooth and cool. Daphne. Astoria, in tow. Draco hunched his head back at that, glad that neither one bothered to glance through his door. He knew that his mother was considering "arrangements" with the Greengrass family, but he didn't want to think about that aspect of his particular future. It—didn't fit him.

His musings on why were interrupted when someone he didn't recognize glided past the door.

And it *was* gliding, nothing so clumsy as walking. Draco stood up and walked to the edge of the door, peering around it to watch the stranger. He had thick black hair, done in neat waves that made Draco suspect some kind of skill with Coiffure Charms. His skin was pale, and he was tall enough to challenge Weasley. Draco wondered if some student who had fled Durmstrang when Dark Arts moved from a subject taught there to the main focus of the school had decided Hogwarts was a more comfortable place to study instead.

But no, he saw when the student turned his head in response to a call from Weasley and he saw Potter's green eyes. *Potter? Really? Since when does he wear his hair like that, or walk like that?*

Yet, when Draco thought about it, he realized that he really had no idea what Potter's hair had looked like in the Battle of Hogwarts, or since. The most important thing about Potter at that point was that he was pulling Draco out of a fire, and then he was covered with blood and looked dead, and then he was alive and dueling the Dark Lord. And then he was testifying for Draco, to say that Draco hadn't given him away at the Manor and he wouldn't have survived without Draco's (accidental, inadvertent) mastery of the Elder Wand. And then he was just gone from Draco's life, because Draco didn't want to read the *Daily Prophet*. It was as much as his mother could get him to do to listen to her summaries of the articles.

Maybe Potter could have changed his hair and his walk that much just because he was appearing in front of the public and he had finally listened to Granger and the other people in his life who would probably try to encourage him to take on more political responsibility. Maybe.

But Draco had stared because, he could acknowledge now without fantasies of a Durmstrang student distorting his view, Potter looked so *exactly* like some of the portraits of his Black ancestors that his mother had brought to Malfoy Manor when she married. Not far off one of the Arcturus Blacks, with perhaps some of old Phineas Nigellus in the way he turned his head.

Draco cocked his head. Well, Potter was related to the Blacks by blood, too, wasn't he? His grandmother had been one. No one had ever suggested that James Potter looked anything like a Black, and it wasn't as direct a connection as Draco's, but still, the traits were there.

It had just struck Draco as unusual, that was all.

He sat down again, in a thoughtful frame of mind, and wondering if he had imagined the fretful, forceful way Potter's jaw had clenched when Weasley launched into some long story about his sister, right before their compartment door shut behind them.

*Maybe I can do something this year besides just keep my eyes down, after all.*

## Look at Me

“And you’re sure that he was looking at you?”

Harry leaned back in his chair and concentrated on the way Ron’s mouth moved to hear him better. They were in the Great Hall, and the shouting of the Sorting Feast was even louder than usual. It seemed that sixty percent of the students had had exciting adventures during the summer, and the other forty percent wanted to listen to them.

Or maybe the noise was to make up for the people who weren’t there, Harry had to admit. About a quarter of the students, mostly in the upper years, hadn’t come back. Harry wondered idly if that was because the upper years had been more involved in resisting the Death Eaters last year or because they’d been more frequent targets for them.

“Yes,” Harry said, coming back to the conversation with a start when Ron rapped his closed fist on the table in front of Harry. “I didn’t see anyone in that compartment at first, and then I turned around a little and saw him leaning out. I didn’t really think he’d come back. His pride was too hurt.”

“Why was he staring at you?” was Ron’s next question.

“Hell if I should know,” Harry said, taking a long sip of pumpkin juice so that he wouldn’t have to answer questions for a few minutes. He didn’t want Hermione to start giving him significant glances about why Draco Malfoy should be looking at him. It was weeks and weeks since he’d lied to his friends about writing a letter to Malfoy, but he was sure Hermione hadn’t forgotten.

Luckily, Hermione was involved in a long conversation with Parvati Patil, who seemed to have become unexpectedly bookish during the year she’d spent away from Hogwarts. Harry sighed in relief and turned back to his food.

About halfway through the meal, though, he started feeling the sharp, prickling sensation that meant someone was staring at him again. It seemed to come from the other side of the room, the Slytherin table. Harry took a long breath, both because he wanted to reassure himself it wasn’t such a big deal and because the roaring rage that had risen in him was like the emotions that had plagued him in the house.

*Who cares if he stares? What does it matter?*

Harry counted to seven under his breath and then snapped his head up, hoping to catch Malfoy by surprise. As it turned out, there was no way to do that. Malfoy was openly staring at Harry, and didn’t even try and turn away to disguise it.

He did make a little, looping motion with his finger at Harry, though, which Harry couldn’t ignore. *Come over and talk to me.*

Harry turned back to his meal, but unfortunately, and of course, Hermione chose that moment to finish her talk with Parvati and turn around.

“Harry! Aren’t you going to talk to Malfoy?” Hermione whispered to him. Her eyes were locked



on the Slytherin table now, too, and other people were turning around to see what everyone was looking at. “He could have information about the house!”

“He didn’t bother to write back to me all summer,” Harry hissed at her, having no trouble making his voice properly venomous, because of the anger that ached all through him. “Why would he want to talk to me *now*?”

“Maybe because it’s the kind of thing that can only be said face-to-face.” Hermione shoved at him. “Go over and talk to him!”

“After the feast,” Harry said, and turned back to his plate.

“Harry—”

“*No!*”

Hermione recoiled, Ron stared at him, and half the conversations at the Gryffindor table stopped. Harry didn’t think about what he did next before he did it. The stares were searing, worse than the sly looks from Kreacher when he was trying to force Harry into becoming the Black heir.

Harry bolted to his feet and out of the Great Hall. He didn’t know exactly where he was going, but he would find *some* place where he could hide.

\*

*That was certainly interesting.*

Draco waited several minutes, for the Great Hall to turn into a concentration of blots of people talking in hushed voices about the latest outburst from Potter. Draco could personally overhear someone wondering if the Dark Lord lived on in Potter’s scar, someone else pronouncing authoritatively that Potter had never stopped being crazy, and a few people cooing about all the stresses he’d been under this summer, with the funerals and the trials.

Draco didn’t think it was any of those, but he wasn’t about to volunteer it. Instead, he stood up when he thought he’d go unremarked and strolled out of the Great Hall after Potter.

Undoubtedly some people did watch him go, but this was where having a former rivalry with Potter came in useful. They would think, with any luck, that he was just on his way to taunt him.

Draco was wondering how he would follow Potter if he’d fled, because most of the good tracking spells were fifth year and above and he couldn’t do them with his restricted wand, but fortune favored him. Potter hadn’t gone far after all. He was standing in one of the alcoves in the entrance hall where the first-years tended to wait for the Sorting, his hands balled in front of him and his breath coming in and out as though he intended to power the Hogwarts Express all by himself.

Draco stopped in front of him. Potter didn’t look up, but Draco made out the sharp twitch of his shoulders. He was certain Potter knew he was there.

Draco didn’t mind. He took the chance to study the sharp angles of Potter’s face, the way his hair curled at the nape of his neck, and the way his skin seemed to have dramatically paled, so that he looked like the ghost of one of Narcissa’s portraits. Draco nodded. Well. Whatever the cause, Potter’s resemblance to a member of the House of Black was undeniable. Draco idly wondered if

someone had told him over the summer that he was ugly, or if Potter had got tired of seeing his famous face staring back at him from the front page of every paper, as well as from the mirror, and decided to do something about it.

“What do you want?”

*At least he decided to stop pretending that he wasn't interested in my presence.* Draco unfolded his arms. “I want to know why you left the feast,” he said.

“But before that.” Potter lifted his head, and although his eyes were still as piercing a green as ever, Draco had been right about the color and proportions of other parts of his face. He was a Black in jawline, in forehead length, in the way his hair looked, to the point that Draco was surprised no one had remarked on the resemblance. Maybe no one else had as much reason to remember the way Blacks looked as his mother and he did. “You motioned to me to come over. And you were staring at me on the train. Why?”

*Why not try honesty?* Draco had already violated his mother's dictum to keep his head down. He might as well break a few other rules. “You look like a Black. I wanted to know why.”

Potter tensed so hard that Draco winced for him before he thought about it. That particular position had to be hurting his shoulders.

“Are you behind it, then?” Potter whispered, taking a step away from the wall. Draco's eyes darted to the sides. He didn't think it was his imagination that the shadows were growing darker as they stretched along the floor, and that one of them, close by Potter's feet, had the shape of a snake. “Did *you* send the shadows and try to make the house drive me out of it? Were you the one affecting Kreacher?”

Draco blinked. The name Kreacher was vaguely familiar, but all the rest of what Potter said sounded like nonsense. “What are you talking about? I want to know why you look like one of my ancestors. I didn't do anything to you!”

“Oh, no?” Potter's voice had deepened. Draco wondered if he would hear a similarity to his mother's if he listened, but right now, he had other things to think about. Like the cobra-shaped shadows that were a few inches from his feet. “You don't know what I'm talking about when I say that you sent the shadows after me? You don't know what I'm talking about when I say that Grimmauld Place was affecting me?”

Draco's mouth fell open. He might know what Potter was talking about, after all, although he had never heard of shadows as part of it. “You inherited the main Black house, didn't you?” he whispered. “That might explain—I mean, maybe not all of it, but some of it.”

He was unprepared for the sharp rage that blazed in Potter's eyes, or the way that Potter darted forwards and pinned Draco against the wall. Draco opened his mouth to protest, and then screamed as something shot through the center of his palm, sticking it to the stone.

Potter drew his wand. Draco tried to look and see what was pinning his hand, but he couldn't take his eyes from Potter's, or the way that Potter's wand rose and caressed his cheek.

“Let's see,” Potter whispered. “Let's see just what you know, what you're responsible for. *Legilimens!*”



## Twists of the Mind

Harry could tell he was hurting Malfoy. The way Malfoy was convulsing would have told him that, if nothing else did, and Malfoy's hands were splayed out and wide, uselessly groping at the stone. And Harry was battering his way through random thoughts and barriers that tried to snap uselessly into place. Malfoy screamed as they fell, although Harry didn't know for sure if the scream was aloud or only in his mind.

But that didn't matter. Malfoy had no business coming up to him and declaring that Harry looked like a Black heir. How would he *know* that, why would he *think* that, unless he had something to do with Harry's transformation in the first place?

So Harry broke in through his Occlumency barriers, which were flimsy things after all when you were willing to use force on them the way Snape had always been willing with Harry, and ended up in the interior of Malfoy's mind.

It was a strange, bubbling, misty place, that stretched in several different directions, each so wide that Harry was tempted to pause and gape. But he hadn't come here to learn about Malfoy's childhood or what Quidditch team he favored. Harry pictured the Black house and set it up in Malfoy's mind like a beacon, a concept that would draw all the memories he had relating to it to him.

And memories came racing up. Harry eagerly clutched them.

Portraits of Blacks Harry didn't know, arranged on what looked like miles of marble walls in Malfoy Manor. A visit when he was very young and an old woman leered and crooned at him. A glimpse of Bellatrix standing in a fireplace and laughing about Kreacher. A Pensieve memory of Grimmauld Place that his mother had once allowed him to visit, and the way Draco had shivered even when he came out of it.

All of it was cold, all of it was dark, and all of it was enough to make Harry narrow his eyes and want to rip someone's throat out. The Malfoys, the Blacks, all the pure-blood families who had grown up with this kind of shit and knew about it, why hadn't *they* been the ones to inherit the house instead?

But Harry knew exactly why it was, and his heart squeezed as he remembered Sirius. No matter how much Harry might hate what Sirius had given him to live with, he could never hate his godfather.

Which meant he would have to put up with it, and try to get rid of the house some other way.

There was a gasp that might have been physical or mental, and someone pushed Harry hard enough to send him sprawling to the floor. He rolled over gracelessly and stared up at Malfoy, who stared back down at him, panting. His hands were formed into hard fists, with a small trickle of blood leaking from one where Harry had used the Pinning Spell, and he looked at Harry as though he was the one who had grown up in this crazy, dark world. Harry made a show of standing up and brushing off the dust and soot that had accumulated on his clothes.

"You *read my mind*," Malfoy said, and his words dripped such pain that Harry had to blink. Had it

hurt that much? Sure, it had hurt when Snape pushed into his mind, but it had been the kind of agony Harry could live with, something that hurt a lot less than what Voldemort and the Dursleys had done to him.

When he looked at Malfoy, though, the git was grey, practically slumping against the wall of the corridor, his mouth open as he panted. Harry sighed and rolled his eyes. He supposed that because he wasn't as skilled in Legilimency as Snape was, he could hurt someone more when he pushed into their minds.

"Sorry," he said, knowing he didn't sound sorry, and also that he didn't particularly care. "I had to know."

"Had to know *what*?" Malfoy stood up and shook his head. "I wasn't in contact with you this summer. I never threatened you. What made you think I was plotting against you?"

"Shadows in the Black house," Harry said. "Ones that scared me. And strange behavior from my house-elf. I thought you might be causing it because you wanted your inheritance back."

Malfoy laughed, high and sharp and eerie. "What makes you think I want *that* place? The way it sculpts its heirs once they're of age is nothing I'm interested in."

Harry took a single step forwards. He didn't know why he should put such importance on the words, why he wasn't rolling his eyes and walking away, except that Kreacher had spoken of heirs, too, and Harry had to wonder what he meant. "What do you mean, sculpts its heirs?"

Malfoy blinked. "You mean, someone let you inherit an Ancient House and didn't explain anything to you?"

"I can hear the capitals in your voice, but it doesn't explain anything to me," Harry said, folding his arms and letting his stare rest on Malfoy in a way that said it should *start* to, and soon.

Malfoy stood there with his arms folded. A fine tremor was making its way through his body. Harry could almost hear his thoughts. Just walk away and say nothing, and it would serve Harry right.

Harry grimaced and moved in with his hand out. "Look, I didn't—I really *didn't* know, okay? I didn't know that I'd shred your mind if I went in like that. I'm sorry. I *am*," he added, when Malfoy glared at him. "But I'm getting these surges of rage and hatred lately, and I don't know why."

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*That would be the house.*

But Draco, tempted as he was because of his headache and the raw inside of his mind to just fling those words at Potter and walk away, held himself back. He didn't really want Potter's ire following him, not after what he had shown himself capable of just now.

Besides, if Draco was right about the old Black place's influence on Potter, it would just grow from here. He must have lived there long enough to start the process of transformation.

"The Ancient Houses are the buildings that are the seats of each bloodline," Draco began

reluctantly. He had to lean against the wall to support his trembling legs, but he did his best to lift his head and strike a cool pose, so Potter wouldn't think he could take advantage. "They're infused with old magic. My ancestors—well, all the pure-blood families of centuries ago, really—didn't like to take the chance that their children would go to Hogwarts and start being influenced by people outside their families to change their ancient traditions. So, when they came of age and were living in the house, the Ancient House would start working on them."

Potter was staring at him. "You mean—you've been through this, too?"

Draco sneered at him. "Malfoy Manor's rites of initiation are nothing like the ones the Blacks thought were suitable." Granted, his mother had hinted around what Grimmauld Place might do more than she had outright explained it to Draco, but Draco knew how to infer things. "My home helped me learn to control my emotions, to draw strength from it when the Dark Lord was living there, and dream sometimes of my ancestors and things they did."

"History lessons in your sleep," Potter muttered, and shook his head. "I think I might prefer threatening shadows."

"And would you prefer coming to hate Muggles?" Draco snapped. "Being crazy, the way that so many of the old Blacks were? You mentioned shadows. I don't know anything about them, but my mother did tell me once that every Black heir, when he's lived in the house long enough for it to work on him, has to make a kill. The kill has to be a living creature, brought down by his own spells. Not always a Muggle, but it is sometimes. Did *you* have to do that, Potter?"

Potter froze in front of him, so still that Draco thought he would strike out again. His eyes blazed.

"And the Blacks were also conscious of appearance," Draco added. "That's one reason so many cousins married cousins, so that even when a child wasn't in the direct line, they could *look* like a Black. Looked into a mirror lately? Your eyes are the same color, but you're taller, your skin's changed, your hair's changed, you walk differently, and probably other things that I didn't notice. That's the reason I was staring at you on the train."

Potter's hands, clasped in front of him, shook. He stilled them with what seemed an effort of will and said, "Shut up, Malfoy."

"I'm telling you the truth," Draco said, holding his hand up in a gesture his mother had taught him, though he doubted Potter would know it. "It's not pleasant, but it's also not something you can go without learning. The house is probably *hungry*. It had no heirs in the last generation, my mother told me. Her cousin Sirius ran away before he came of age, and he didn't live there again, so the house's influence faded. His younger brother Regulus didn't live long enough in the house after he was of age, either. I think he joined the Death Eaters, and after that he lived in other places, safehouses, or went on raids. So the house wants someone to sculpt, mold, play with, *eat*. That about what's been happening to you, Potter?"

"*Shut up, Malfoy.*"

Draco tried to open his mouth again, and found his voice gone. His hand flew to his throat, and he winced as he touched his lips, his tongue. They would still move, but all sound was gone. It was as though Potter had cast a wandless, nonverbal *Silencio*.

Potter's eyes widened. For a second, he stood there, staring and panting. Then he bolted down the hall towards the stairs that led up to Gryffindor Tower.

Draco cleared his throat, pleased to find some sound returning. He didn't take his eyes off the space Potter had occupied before he fled, though.

*Someone really should help him before he gets himself into hotter water than he can handle.*

*But it doesn't have to be me.*

## Changes Coming

“Harry?”

It was Ron. Harry pushed his face further into the pillow and said nothing. What was there to say? Ron didn't know what had happened between Harry and Malfoy in the corridor, but he'd seen Harry flee the Great Hall, and he had to know something was wrong.

Ron, though, didn't take the silent hint to fuck off. He tucked Harry's bed curtains out of the way and stared at him. Harry could feel that stare burning on the back of his neck, and it stung and made raw all the places where Malfoy's stare of contempt had already landed.

“Mate—”

Harry rolled over and held up his wand. He didn't say a word. He didn't know what he *would* say. If he opened his mouth, a spell was as likely to come out as a scolding.

Ron stood still, as though confronting a wild animal. Then he put up his hands and backed away, one step, another, letting the curtain fall. Harry found that he couldn't release his grip on the wand until he was sure that Ron was on the other side of the bedroom, from the short, panting breaths he was releasing.

Harry dropped his head, then, and buried his face in his shaking hands.

What was *happening* to him?

Well, Malfoy had given him part of the answer. But Harry didn't know how the house could affect him when he was still out of it. He hadn't even seen Kreacher since the day he'd fled. He hadn't had to kill anything. He'd dealt with surges of rage, but his friends had put that down to the aftereffects of the war, and after a while, so had Harry.

If he couldn't be sane anymore, what did that mean?

Harry sat up. No. He refused to just accept that he would be like this for the rest of his life, until he went mad or died. He had beaten Voldemort. No moldy house was going to defeat him.

He still didn't want to go back to Grimmauld Place, not alone, but there was something else he could do. He waited until he heard the sounds of Ron leaving the room, and then called, “Kreacher! Come quietly.”

Kreacher was there in seconds, inside the curtains beside the bed, and bowing over and over again. He said nothing, but there was an expression of twisted delight on his face that made Harry flinch before he decided that, damn it, he *was* going to keep this conversation going. Kreacher couldn't frighten him into letting him go, either. If Harry was the heir of the House of Black, then he had the right to question his house-elf.

“I want you to tell me if I look like a Black to you,” Harry said, gesturing at his face.

Kreacher beamed at him, with a tender side to the smile that Harry had never seen before, and



which therefore scared the shit out of him. “Master looks like a most marvelous Black, yes, yes,” Kreacher whispered.

Harry shut his eyes. It made sense that Malfoy would know more about that than anyone else, but it was still a bit devastating to have it confirmed.

“Master should be coming back home,” Kreacher whispered, so soft and smooth that Harry could have pretended it was a voice in his dreams, except that he wasn’t *that* expert at lying to himself. “Master can be resting in his bedroom. Master can be thinking with the shadows. Master is being of the house now.”

Harry felt his eyes open as if they belonged to someone else, but the voice that spoke was his, directly connected to his thoughts. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” he whispered. “So the house can eat me, and you can have your precious Blacks back?”

Kreacher stared at him, hands making small random circles in the air. “Master is not feeling well?” he asked hesitantly. “The house is not eating Master Black. It is helping you recover and have an heir.”

Harry laughed. He thought he heard someone else rustle in bed beyond his tightly-drawn curtains, but he couldn’t bring himself to care about that right now. “You want me to have a kid,” he said. “So you can make that kid into a proper heir, and then get rid of me. Oh, I see it all now. You’re probably planning to have a wall swallow me or something.”

Kreacher tugged on his ears and bowed low. “Kreacher is beings very sorry for distressing Master Black,” he whispered. “Master is telling Kreacher whats he can do to make it up to him.”

“*Nothing*,” Harry snarled. “You were the one who knew about the danger and didn’t warn me! Sirius should have known, but maybe he didn’t! But you’ve been there a long time. You were the one who told me about the kills that all the heirs of Black have to make. You should have told me and let me leave!”

Kreacher blinked again. Harry had the distant sense that this evening was probably one of the most puzzling in his life, but Harry shoved aside the insight. Like hell did he care.

“But why is Master Harry wanting to leave?” Kreacher whispered. “It is being his *home*.”

Harry clenched his hands. He wanted to draw his wand and curse Kreacher, but that wouldn’t hurt enough. Nothing could make up for the betrayal of Kreacher knowing and not telling him, or the way he acted now, as though he had no idea why Harry would want to escape having his soul corrupted.

“Kreacher,” he hissed. “Master is displeased.”

Kreacher’s eyes seemed to clear a little, even as he cowered on the floor and covered his head with his hands. “Yes,” he whispered. “What is Master wanting Kreacher to do?”

“Punish yourself,” Harry said. “As hard as you can without leaving you useless for me to work with.”

“Master,” Kreacher said, with a long bow. He straightened from the bow into a blur of motion, rushing at the wall opposite the bed.

Harry watched with an odd sound coming out of his mouth. He knew what it was when he listened: the kind of whine that he had heard when Bellatrix Lestrange was watching someone writhe under the Cruciatus Curse.

Harry didn't want to be making that noise. With one part of him, anyway. But the part that wanted it must have been stronger, because he went on making it, and watched as Kreacher bashed his head against the wall, and blood began to flow slowly down. It was darker and thicker than human blood, something Harry couldn't remember noticing when he had watched Dobby bleed to death.

*Dobby was wrong.*

The thought sliced into his head like a knife, like the lightning bolt he had used to kill the Kneazle. Harry sat still, and watched Kreacher pound his head until one eye was swollen shut, and blood covered his face from a cut on his forehead, and his nose was broken and the nostrils pointing in different directions like the sights of a misaimed gun.

Kreacher limped slowly back at last. "Kreacher is pleasing master," he whispered, sinking to the floor in front of the bed.

Harry found that he was finally able to shut his mouth and cut off that whining noise. "You pleased me very much, Kreacher," he whispered, sliding out of bed and kneeling beside the house-elf. "You paid for your betrayal and not telling me the truth about the house that I inherited and have to live in."

Kreacher rolled his head back and gave Harry a dazed, bloodied grin. "Master is being pleased," he whispered. "This compensates Kreacher for *everything*."

Then he passed out. Or so Harry assumed, because he was still, and yet Harry could still feel a heartbeat under his fingers.

Harry closed his eyes. There was a drifting satisfaction in his thoughts, coiling and uncoiling like mist. He wanted to stroke Kreacher's head, even with the greasy hair there, and so he did it, sliding the strands through his fingers.

The mist gradually withdrew to the back of his mind, although Harry imagined he could still feel it floating there, ready to come out again when he was ready.

And then clarity returned, which wasn't the same thing as the mere absence of the mist.

Harry sprang to his feet, staring at Kreacher. Kreacher didn't move, and there was no sign that anyone else in the room had heard him, either. Kreacher must have used his own magic to keep his punishment silent.

The punishment *Harry* had ordered him to undergo.

Harry turned his head to the side and was noisily sick. Then he sat back, rubbing his hand across his mouth and shuddering again and again.

When he thought about it, his decision was made. He stood up and picked up Kreacher, casting a Disillusionment Charm on both of them and a few healing spells on Kreacher's wounds.

The only person who seemed to know anything about this was Malfoy, and he was the one Harry had to go to.

## Enter, Carrying a House-Elf

Draco rolled over sleepily. He had thought someone was standing right beside him, peering down into his face, with a *Lumos* on their wand. But he had charmed his bed to shut its curtains tightly against someone entering and to let him know with an alarm if anyone did, so it couldn't be that.

Then he opened his eyes, and saw the figure that *did* loom over him and the traces of blood clinging to its face, and opened his mouth to scream.

"Hush, Malfoy," Potter's voice said. Of course it was Potter's voice, although with the dark twist to it that Draco was coming to associate with his transformed Black nature. "I don't want you crying out." He aimed his wand at Draco's throat, and Draco felt the skin there tremble as he realized that he really couldn't make any sound. He didn't think Potter had cast a spell, but nevertheless, he was under orders.

That made him want to groan, and be doubly frustrated that he couldn't. *Don't tell me Potter has that bloody power over all members of the House of Black that Aunt Bella was always prattling on about?*

"I want you to tell me how to heal a house-elf," Potter said, and then the limp bundle in his arms became recognizable. Draco didn't think the blood on Potter's face was his, either, or that of some unfortunate animal he'd made his meal. That was something, at least.

But it was nothing compared to Draco's frustration when he opened his mouth and discovered that his breath was still silent. He tapped his throat and gave Potter a harsh glance, even as he moved back so Potter could set the elf down on his bed, as he undoubtedly proposed to do. Draco was glad that some of the most stringent cleaning spells he knew were considered third-year and thus were still in reach of his wand.

"Oh, right," Potter said blankly, and waved one hand around. Draco felt no loosening of the constriction on his voice. He looked at Potter.

Potter bent towards Draco, a flame like greasy oil in his eyes. Draco wanted to shrink. At this moment, Potter looked like one of the portraits of Blacks who had never made sense. Not much like Aunt Bella, but Draco thought longer hair would do it.

"I don't know how I did that," Potter said, in a voice like wind and lightning. "You're going to have to fight your way past it yourself."

Draco clutched his wand, and didn't care that he might almost be in danger of snapping it. He didn't *deserve* this humiliation. He had done so much less than other people in the war, all right, but that was less of evil as well as of good, and he was also of the blood of the Blacks—

The constriction on his throat snapped. Draco drew in a grateful breath and decided to ignore, for the moment, that he didn't know if the spell had gone away because Potter wanted him to speak or if Draco really had been able to call on the power of his ancestry for a brief second. He nodded to Potter and said, "How did he get injured?"

Potter hesitated, and Draco knew the truth as though he had etched it on stone tablets. He stared at

Potter, remembered how he had lost Draco's father one of their house-elves, and shook his head slowly.

"You can't repair injuries that an elf inflicted on itself when its master ordered it to be punished," he said. "It can't be done. And house-elves are resilient. Most of them survive no matter what happens to them."

Potter stared at him with widened eyes. Then he folded one hand into a fist and slammed it into the pillow beside Draco's head.

Draco kept himself from flinching with an effort. It was a bleak kind of comfort to know that, no matter what Potter did, what laws of nature and blood and magic he ordered around, this was still something he couldn't do anything about. "What I'm telling you is true." He folded his legs under him and sneered at Potter. "Who knows more about having house-elves here? My mother did try to heal a few of the house-elves once, when my father had ordered them to punish themselves and she wanted them better to help in the garden. Nothing happened. And now I can't use some of the spells that she did, anyway." He lifted his half-useless wand, ignoring the thrum of power through the hawthorn wood when it felt Potter's presence. "You've well and truly fucked yourself over, Potter."

Potter collapsed onto the bed, and sure enough, the blood ran down the house-elf's side and soaked into Draco's blankets. Draco was already forming one of the cleaning charm incantations in his mind when Potter sat up abruptly and said, "You know something about this. How do I escape from the house?"

Draco blinked. "You don't."

Potter snarled at him.

"You *don't*," Draco said, wondering if this was going to be something else like the house-elf, where Potter refused to accept it at first and then gave in, or whether Draco would be unlucky enough to end up as a sacrifice to Potter's stubbornness. "The house takes an heir who lives in it for an unbroken month after he comes of age. Or she, sometimes, but there haven't been many female heirs in a long time. It couldn't take my cousins Sirius and Regulus because they didn't spend enough time there *after they came of age*. But if you were there this summer, then it has you. It won't stop until it's swallowed you."

"I don't want it to swallow me."

Draco rolled his eyes. Yes, there was the familiar Harry Potter ignorance, the insistence that he was too *special* to give in to the commonplace fates that took over other people's lives. Or maybe he thought that, since he'd already had one destiny, he couldn't have another one.

"Then go to Gringotts and apply for a formal process of disinheritance," Draco said. "Say that you want to hold the Black fortune and property in trust for one of your children, or that you want to give it back to the only surviving Blacks."

Potter stared at him with his mouth open. Draco didn't particularly enjoy being able to count all his teeth. "Will that work?"

Draco would have liked to say it would, but he couldn't move his tongue around the lie. Probably another example of the Black heir having power over all members of the Black bloodline. He

grimaced. “No. The house has you now. It would work if you were the Black heir but hadn’t spent time living in the house. By the time that you complete the process, which is long and has a lot of paperwork, the house will have changed you to the point that you won’t be able to imagine giving it up.”

Potter made a desperate noise and buried his head in his hands. Draco shifted his feet away from both Potter and the mass of the wounded house-elf. At least its injuries had closed and the cleaning charms Draco had to use would be less stringent than he’d been worried about; they might not even make holes in the sheets that he would then have to close with a *Reparo*.

“You have to help me,” Potter said suddenly, lifting his head. “You know so much more about this than I do. You could help me escape.”

Draco leaned forwards and spoke as slowly and loudly as he could. “Pot. Ter. There. *Is*. No. Escape.”

“There must be.” Potter’s eyes burned with an even more familiar fanatical light than the last one Draco had seen in them, because this one might have come straight from Aunt Bella’s face. “You’re going to help me find it.” When Draco opened his mouth to refuse again, Potter added, “I know that you have to do it if I command you. But you can just think of it as blackmail. I’ll tell people that you’ve been casting spells that are illegal for you if you refuse.”

Draco cast him a hopeless glance. Harry Potter’s testimony would be enough to condemn him as it had been to save him, he knew. And while he thought that this was hopeless and it would probably end up with Potter as another sacrifice to the Black house, at least pretending to help might guarantee that Draco would stay free of Azkaban. Either Potter’s luck would turn up after all, and they would find a way out, or Potter would turn into enough of a Black to have that feeling for family and approval of the Dark Arts that haunted all the heirs. He wouldn’t want to put Draco in prison then.

“Fine,” Draco said shortly. “Meet me in the library tomorrow.”

*I should have known it would end up with me as a sacrifice to his stubbornness. Because since when does a Potter, or a Black, give in?*

## Fashion Advice

“Are you all right, mate?”

Ron’s cautious question nearly set off Harry’s temper again. He wanted to turn around and ask if Ron feared him. He wanted to ask if Ron knew about what had happened to Kreacher yesterday, and whether he would dare approach Harry if he *knew*.

But the thought contained its own answer, so Harry glanced up, and sighed, and said, “Yeah. Sorry for snapping at you. I just—the pressure of being back in Hogwarts made me remember everything we lost, you know?”

That wasn’t it at all, and the same part of Harry that had wanted to flare out with temper sneered when Ron smiled at him and nodded. “I understand.” His voice sank. “When I look at the part of the school where Fred died...”

Harry made soothing noises and patted Ron’s shoulder, because it was what was expected of him, but his gaze drifted across the room and sought out Malfoy. He was sitting at the Slytherin table, so straight-backed that Harry wondered he didn’t hurt his spine. He caught Harry staring and grimaced, ducking his head and looking away.

Yes, he should, Harry thought, remembering the way Malfoy had looked at him in bed last night. He had fallen silent at Harry’s command, because he *had* to. He had agreed to help him, because he *had* to. Harry had forced or tricked him into it. He knew that Malfoy would never have taken such a risk on his own.

“...And it makes me understand what you’re going through,” Ron said with a sad little sigh, and Harry snapped back to the present.

The person he *wanted* to be was the one Ron thought he was talking to, Harry reminded himself sternly. Not the one who had wounded Kreacher, or knelt on Malfoy’s bed and ordered him around. If he remained under the house’s influence, then the person Ron was talking to might die, and Harry might never realize exactly where he had gone.

He needed to remember that.

“I can’t believe we have Potions first,” Ron was groaning now, ruffling his schedule as though the words would change if he shook it hard enough. “At least it’s not so bad under Slughorn as it was under Snape, right, mate?” He nudged Harry in the ribs with his elbow, making him grunt a little.

“You shouldn’t say that, Ron,” Hermione immediately jumped in. “Snape was a brilliant teacher, and he *died* defending us, and even though he had to do some horrible things because he was pretending to be a loyal Death Eater, he...”

Harry turned the conversation out. It was one of Hermione’s more frequent obsessions ever since they had got back to the castle. Harry half-wanted to tell her to go and ask Snape’s portrait in the Headmistress’s office if *he* thought of himself as a hero, but the problem with Hermione was that she would think it was a brilliant idea and promptly go do it.

Now Malfoy was drinking a cup of tea. He glanced up at Harry, met his eyes, and looked away again, a faint pallor stealing down his cheeks. Harry reckoned it was less revealing than a blush, but still. He wondered that he should have better control of his emotions than Malfoy, who had presumably been trained in doing that.

Harry glanced at his schedule, but what he wanted to know was when their free period arrived. Then he would go to the library. He could hardly wait.

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“One of the first things you need is a haircut.”

Draco had arrived in the library to find Potter hunched over a table, reading a book that looked like it came from the Restricted Section. His scowl had already sent a few younger students hurrying away. Draco shook his head as he slid into the seat across from him. He was immune to the fearsome aura Potter was trying to project because he *had* to help the idiot, and meanwhile, he could take advantage of that to speak a few sensible words on the subject.

“What do you mean?” Potter scowled at him in turn, but Draco noticed that he didn’t command him to be silent. His hand reached up and tugged at his tangled hair instead.

“You look more and more like a Black every day,” Draco said, shaking his head wisely. He didn’t know that that was literally true, but it sounded good. And there was the chance that someone might notice Potter’s resemblance to a Black if they had occasion to think about it in any depth. “The hair enhances it. Remember those pictures they had of your mental godfather when he got loose? The way his *mane* hung around his face and floated like he never had a comb? That could make people think of you as like him.”

He shut up then, because Potter’s wand was digging into his thigh under the table. Potter leaned nearer and whispered, “He never had a comb, and he had a *mane*, because he was in Azkaban. They don’t exactly give you grooming implements in there!”

Draco held his mouth open, breathing shallowly. Then he shrugged and extended his hands. “Remember, Potter, I’m the only one who can help you with this. If you make me bleed out in the middle of the library, I don’t think it’ll help much.”

Potter cursed raggedly and pulled his wand back, resting it on the chair beside him, from the click. He ran his hand through that shaggy hair and whispered, “What’s happening to me? All these emotions...they’re not my own. I would have got upset if you’d said that about Sirius, but not enough to make me want to cut your leg open.”

So that *was* what would have happened. Draco managed to hang onto his calm expression, although it took an effort. “It’s the house, of course,” he said. “And someone’s going to notice soon. When they do, we have to keep them from looking in the right direction for a while. That’s why I recommended a haircut.”

Potter stared at him. “Then you don’t think I can keep it a secret from people?”

“No,” Draco said. “No more than I think you can escape from the house.” He rolled his eyes when Potter gaped at him. “The important thing is that we’re going to *try*, right? And we have to stay safe and away from notice long enough to try. So you need to cut your hair.”



“Fine,” Potter muttered, looking away, after a staring contest that Draco thought for sure he would lose. “I’ll cut my hair the minute I’m back in my rooms and have a spare half-hour—”

“It doesn’t take that long,” Draco said, wanting to laugh when Potter slewed around again and gaped at him like a monkey. He managed to confine it to a quiet chuckle and a shake of his head. “Anyway, I know a spell that will take a few minutes. But you can’t use it on yourself, unless you have eyes in the back of your head. Has the house let you grow those yet?”

He looked inquiringly at Potter, who scowled at him. He could be attractive, if he modified the hair and some of his expressions, Draco thought idly. He stood up and circled behind Potter. Potter’s hands slammed together on the library table, but he sat there, hissing between his teeth, as Draco rested his wand against the nape of Potter’s neck.

“Good,” Draco whispered. This close, he could see the pallor of Potter’s skin under his hair, a more natural pallor than the kind the house had put on his face, and he could smell sweat. “Now. *Tondeo*.”

The hair that he had indicated with a sweep of his wand fell away from Potter’s neck, and Draco Vanished it before it could hit the floor. He wanted no awkward questions about what it was doing there, and Potter was about as secret as an earthquake.

Potter started to stir, and Draco shook his head. “I’m not done yet. *Tondeo*,” he added, and took off some of the wild locks that clung around the left side of Potter’s face.

This time, Potter sat still like a good little boy as Draco trimmed the right side and then stepped back to consider. He didn’t think he could construct the *exact* birds-nest look that Potter had had last year; it would attract attention in a different but equally bad way even if he could, he thought. So he settled for doing something that would make Potter look good. He rested the wand in the middle of Potter’s nape again and whispered, “*Tondeo circa*.”

Potter shuddered as the magic moved over him, and Draco let his hand rest for a moment on the skin revealed as the hair fell to the floor. Then he Vanished that, too, and stepped back, nodding. “There you are.”

Potter turned in his seat and looked at him.

Draco fell back one step, then another. He had seen that look in one very *particular* Black portrait—that of Pollux Black, who, even though he had married a Crabbe, was said to have been interested in his own sisters.

And the Blacks had married cousins before...

Draco turned and walked away. He *forced* himself to walk, despite the throb of hungry magic coming from behind him. He maintained a prim little pace, with his head proudly lifted, until he got out of the library.

Then he ran.

## Like a Throb in the Blood

“Harry.”

Harry kept his face down, his fists on his knees. He just couldn't accord anything outside his head the importance it should have had right now. He kept thinking of the way that his blood had *throbbed* when he was looking into Malfoy's face, after the git had cut his hair.

“*Harry.*”

It had been real, no doubt about that, the same way that the surges of rage and hatred were real. But different, Harry thought, because it connected with some of his old memories and drew on them, instead of being entirely new.

The memories of Malfoy being all pointed and pale now emphasized his cheekbones and the shape of his forehead, whispering to Harry of how much of his face was *Black*. His mother had been of that House, it was true, no matter what his last name was. And his hands...long, slender, and graceful, the way a pure-blood's hands should be. Harry should want to hold them, caress them. He had trusted them near the nape of his neck and his throat, with a spell that was meant to cut hair but could be adapted to slice through skin. That had to mean something, didn't it, that he trusted someone who had so recently been an enemy?

“*HARRY!*”

“*What?*” Harry snapped back, turning around on the bed so that he could look into Hermione's face.

She had come up to the boys' bedroom the way she rarely did in the Burrow; she and Ron seemed to have their private places on the ground floor, or they sat and snuggled in the kitchen. Now that they were back at school, Harry supposed they'd had to find other places.

Following the thought came cold, white indifference. He wanted to go back to thinking about Malfoy, not scrape his mind through the puddles of shallow, dirty water that Hermione wanted him to be interested in. And that was all her concerns were. Shallow, dirty, unworthy of being considered by someone who'd won a war and had *other things on his mind*.

“I'm worried about you,” Hermione said, and sat down on his bed, looking at Harry's hands.

Harry became aware that one of them was on his wand, and took it off, stretching it up his pillow and trying to make it seem as if he had touched his wand accidentally, not on purpose, on the way to somewhere else. The emotions blurred and surged in him like storm-waves, and he blew out his breath and tried to remember what Hermione had done for him during the war, how she'd been his best friend sometimes when Ron was gone, how smart she was and how steadfast.

It was harder than it should have been. If his old memories of Malfoy were sharp and clear, *these* were fogged like black glass.

“I'm fine,” Harry said at last, when Hermione didn't move or speak and he realized she wanted an answer to her question. “Just fine,” he repeated, because that first one didn't reassure her.

"I wonder," Hermione said. "You said that you were over what the house did to you, but the last few days, you've been snapping at people." She hesitated, but Harry wasn't sure whether that was because she didn't know how to phrase it or because of the expression on his face, until she spoke again. "And now you're glaring at me."

"I never welcomed it when you tried to pry too hard," Harry whispered, looking down. "I asked you to leave it alone when I said that Ginny and I probably weren't getting back together, and I asked you to leave the Dursleys alone, and I asked you to stop trying to counsel me about Sirius, and—"

"Fine," Hermione said. "But most of the time, you were just hurting yourself with that, and maybe Ginny. But Ginny seemed fine with it, so I didn't question that part." She hesitated again, bit her lip, and then apparently decided that she needed to jump over the edge and fully commit herself. "Now, I think you might."

"What makes you think I might?" Harry was drawing his wand through his fingers again. He made himself stop, lay it down, and look her full in the face.

Hermione blinked. "Did you cut your hair?"

Harry snapped his fingers in front of her face, and watched her jerk back with an emotion too sluggish and cold to be called satisfaction, but which was pretty close to it. "Focus, Hermione," he hissed.

"Fine," Hermione said, and her courage rose to meet him, bright and fierce. "Because you roared at Ron last night, and you sat through class this morning snapping at people and clutching your wand, and you went to the library and I saw you reading a book from the Restricted Section." Harry caught his breath, waiting for her to say that she'd seen his meeting with Malfoy, but she went on without a pause. "Look, if it's a curse or something, or a manifestation of your grief, then I think you should talk to a Mind-Healer."

Harry recoiled a little. "You never said that before."

"You never frightened me before." Hermione locked her hands around her legs. Harry realized it was to keep from moving away from him, and began to laugh, his mouth tasting of ashes. Hermione didn't move, though, just kept her gaze fully and stubbornly on him, and nodded as though Harry had come around to the point she wanted him to see. "Now, you do. Now, I think you should see someone." Abruptly, she grabbed Harry's chin and tilted it back, and he was so astonished he let her do it. "See? I knew it!"

Since Harry could hardly see his own neck without a mirror, he conjured one, the motion of his wand feeling fluid and strange. He looked at the scars the silver Kneazle had left, and swallowed when he saw the shape the scars had taken in the mirror: a circle, with a scratch down the middle of it. It looked like the number 1.

Harry swallowed again, and watched the scar bob. So, all right, it looked that way. That didn't mean it was *really* counting down to something. The line that looked like a 1 could be a random scratch.

He told that to Hermione, and got one of those withering looks that he could live without seeing again.

“Right,” Hermione said. “But even if it was random and not a number, the fact is that *your scars have changed!* They were just thin lines before, and now they’re in a circle.” She poked Harry in the neck as if she could make the scars move and watch them do it.

“I told you that before,” Harry said, arching his neck away from her and wishing there was a way to get further back. *For fuck’s sake, Hermione, I’m not a project.* He didn’t say that, because there was a dim sense in the back of his mind that he shouldn’t. “When I got the scars from the Kneazle, they were fresh and bleeding, and then they scabbed over, but then *this* happened.” He gestured at the scars that were still arranged in old, parallel lines down towards his collarbone. “Unless you don’t believe me about the Kneazle attacking me that afternoon.”

“No,” Hermione said, and Harry was about to explode until she continued, “I believe you. But I didn’t see them change, and this time, I am.” She stared at his neck with rapt fascination. “Do you think you should call Kreacher and ask him to explain it?”

“No.”

Hermione ducked a little, then sat up and nodded. “Right, Harry,” she said, gently, carefully. “I didn’t mean to say that you had to. It was just a suggestion.”

“No,” Harry repeated, keeping his head bowed. “He’s a part of it. He wanted me to go out into the garden right before the Kneazle attacked me. He wants whatever’s happening to happen. The only way he would tell me was if he thought I couldn’t stop it.”

He didn’t want to admit that Kreacher was in terrible shape right now, healing but still wounded, and if he summoned the little elf, Hermione would see it. In a way, that would be a relief, to get all the confessions out into the open and hand over the problem to her.

But he didn’t want to. The hard, cold rock at the center of him didn’t. And Hermione nodding and standing up with the “research look” on her face, her jaw thrust forwards and her hands on her hips, made his head hurt worse.

“Right,” she said. “I’ll go see what I can find out.”

She ran out of the room, and Harry groaned silently. So now Hermione was part of it, too. Malfoy would be disgusted, but Harry couldn’t see a way to shut her out.

*Malfoy...*

The memory of the throb in his blood came back again, and Harry nearly slipped into another memory-reverie about Malfoy’s face and fingers until he realized something else. His hand brushed something in his lap, an object that *shouldn’t* be there.

He stared down at his own erection a moment, and then flung up Silencing Wards around his bed before he began to cast the spells that would numb it and push it down.

This could not be happening. Parts of it were, like the transformation of the scars on his neck, but not others. He was *not* getting hard over Malfoy. He wouldn’t admit it.

Or the throb in his blood, or the voice whispering and sighing Malfoy’s name in the back of his mind that sounded like a twisted version of his own.

Or the sensation in his belly that he could only identify as hunger.

## Black Descent

Draco sat on his bed and closed his eyes. No one else could see anything, he was sure. He had perfect control of his features when he wanted to, and not that many people in Slytherin had acted interested in him since he came back to the school.

Besides, he had the curtains of his bed welded shut.

But inside, the emotions tumbled and spun like clothes subjected to house-elf magic. What the *hell* had Potter been trying to do, when he looked at Draco as though his mouth was dry with desire? It had made Draco's mouth dry, too, but with fear. Did Potter *want* him?

It seemed so. Draco had been the recipient of looks like that from other people, and it always had to do with desire. He had simply never thought that Potter would be one of them.

*Why not? Your aunt was.*

Draco shuddered. That was one memory of the war that he always shied away from, but it was waiting for him in his nightmares.

Maybe running from it wasn't the way to exorcise it. Maybe he would only get rid of it when he faced it squarely.

He knew what his mother would say about that: it was a Gryffindor thing to think, and Draco had been affected by the articles in the paper that praised Gryffindor values. But Draco, now, recalled the look in Potter's eyes—which he could do without much effort—and then called up the image of his Aunt Bellatrix.

She had been waiting for him outside his parents' bedroom, which the Dark Lord frequently used as a torture chamber. She had crowded Draco up against the wall, her hands hovering just above his arms. Draco had stared down and watched the way the short hairs on his arms stood up, as if reaching for her palms. Even the knowledge that it had to do with her proximity and not any desire on his part couldn't lessen the sickness. He might have vomited if he'd had anything left in his belly after the latest session as the Dark Lord's interrogator.

"You're grown up now, baby boy," Bellatrix had crooned to him. "*Look at me.*"

And Draco had looked up and straight into her eyes, huge and liquid and dark and black and Black, and he'd run, the way he had from Potter. Bellatrix had laughed at his back, and hadn't bothered to come after him. She knew, the way Draco had, that she could find him whenever she wanted in Malfoy Manor. And she stood considerably higher up in the hierarchy of Death Eaters than Draco or his parents did. Others wouldn't deny her clues to find Draco, if he tried to hide.

Draco came out of his trance, breathing fast. So. Yes. The look in Bellatrix's eyes and the one in Potter's had been the same.

Draco's hands clenched in front of him, and he wanted to spit. There was a difference, though. Hogwarts was a lot bigger than Malfoy Manor, and Potter didn't have power over him the way Bellatrix had, because he didn't have the favor of a crazy Dark Lord.

*But he could command you to be silent because he's the Black heir now. What if he could command you to keep still?*

Draco nearly ripped the sheets off the bed. He shook his head violently, and went on shaking it long past the point where he would have had to explain it if someone else was there. Hell, he almost had to explain it to *himself*.

No. No, he was not going to let that happen. Potter might want it to happen, as he fell further and further under the influence of the house, and at least it was less like incest than what Bellatrix had wanted to do. But Draco was not going to allow it.

Because he didn't want to. Because sometimes, he could enforce his will despite everything outside him disagreeing with it.

He would help Potter to solve the seemingly insoluble problem, and get rid of the house's influence. Because his own safety was bound up in it now, and if his mother had thought he should stay out of trouble this year and not become an instigator, it didn't mean that he had to become a victim, either.

Draco undid the curtains and picked up parchment and ink. He needed to write a letter to his mother, to ask her if she remembered something he didn't about the Black family and the way it chose its heirs, and if there was any help she could offer him in getting out from under this weight.

Then he would go to dinner and let Potter *look* at him. He could look all he wanted. He wasn't going to touch.

Draco paused with his quill just dipped into the ink. Was this another way that he could manipulate Potter? Use desire as a weapon the way he couldn't with Bellatrix, because she was simply far more powerful than he was?

*It's an idea. It's an idea that might keep me from being afraid.*

And Draco was so sick of being afraid.

\*

Harry kept his eyes on the table or on his plate for most of dinner. He didn't want to look at the Slytherin table. He didn't want to see Malfoy, just in case what had happened in the library repeated here. It was one thing dealing with it in the privacy of his room; someone was far more likely to notice here.

But inevitably, there was a swirl of pale hair in front of him, and Harry was looking up at it before he thought better, his eyes locking on the blond head.

Malfoy sat at his usual place at the Slytherin table, shoved over to the side now, away from the central action. Strange, Harry thought now, that he hadn't tried to get that back. It would have been hard, with so many of his friends gone and the students from families who had escaped prison scrambling to dissociate themselves from Death Eaters, but maybe he could have done it.

The Malfoy Harry remembered *would* have done it, if only because he couldn't stand to be left out of power.

But he thought the new one was more interesting.

Malfoy met his eyes, and the emotions swirled in Harry's stomach, and built, and locked. They had claws, and they felt as if they could rip Harry's belly open. Harry licked his lips, and sat a little further back from the table.

Hermione was the only one to shoot him a keen glance. Ron had got into a heated argument with Dean, who'd apparently gone to see the Cannons play recently, over whether or not they had a sick bulldog's chance of winning their next game, and most other people weren't as interested in Harry as they'd been last year. They were focused on living their lives.

*Shouldn't I be, too? And what's sex if not part of life?*

There could be no doubt about it this time. Malfoy was looking Harry in the eye. Then he glanced aside, stood up, and left the Great Hall, not running the way he had from Harry earlier.

Harry couldn't have resisted if Hermione had been about to announce his secret to all and sundry. He stood up and followed.

Malfoy was waiting for him in the first alcove of the entrance hall where they stood a chance of avoiding the eyes of students coming out of dinner. Harry found himself leaning in front of Malfoy, taking one of his hands and pinning it to the wall above him.

"What do you want?" Harry whispered. "You looked at me like you were thinking something. Have you thought of a solution to the problem?" Not that he really wanted a solution to the problem at the moment. The scars on his neck still only said 1. And solutions seemed like nothing compared to the sweet stirring in his groin.

Malfoy stepped back and ripped his wrist away from Harry.

Harry opened his mouth. He didn't know what he would have said, but Malfoy stared at him and snapped, "You look ridiculous with that drool hanging from your chin."

Harry snapped his mouth shut and wiped his chin. There was no drool, of course, although it *was* a little wet. He glared at Malfoy. "What are you doing?"

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Getting you out here alone so I can talk to you. Listen. I have no desire whatever to be with someone who can't control himself, and that's you at the moment."

Harry felt a sharp, sudden leap up the middle of his chest, as though someone had hooked his groin to his heart. He said, without stopping to think about the consequences, "Does that mean that I *can* have you if I control myself?"

Malfoy narrowed his eyes a little, apparently confused by the spectacle of a Harry who wanted him. Harry thought he ought to have felt more confused himself, but...well, it felt too good. And weren't his friends always telling him that he didn't have as much to worry about now and ought to calm down and think about dating?

"Maybe," Malfoy finally said, glancing a little off to the side.

Harry waited until Malfoy looked back again, presenting someone who could control himself.



Then he whispered, “What about now?” and took Malfoy’s face in his hands, leaning forwards to press his mouth against his.

## Manipulating the Manipulator

Draco froze for so long a second that Potter's tongue was almost in his mouth before he responded. And then he raised his hands and shoved Potter back, hard.

Potter staggered, his tongue flicking up and down for a second, looking like a snake's. He stared at Draco as if he couldn't imagine why Draco would force him away from the kiss, and there was so much outrage there—Potter outrage, not Black outrage—that Draco thought he knew what would happen in a second. Potter would get angry.

*Not a good start for manipulating him by the strings of his desire.*

Draco had to decide what to do now more quickly than he had reacted. Luckily, he knew the way.

He folded his arms and looked loftily off to the side. "Honestly, Potter," he said. "Do you think I would kiss you, be with you, if there wasn't something in it for me? So far, there's nothing. You threatened me into helping you, and I saw what you did to Kreacher. How do I know that you wouldn't just torture me if I did something that displeased you, like breathing in the wrong way?"

"Not you. I would never hurt you."

Draco swung his head sharply around, the nape of his neck prickling. Potter was looking at him with eyes gone so liquid a deep green that Draco couldn't tell what he was feeling from them. But the way Potter had come back towards him, and lifted a hand to stroke Draco's hair, spoke his feelings all too well.

Draco caught his breath, and struck Potter's hand away.

Potter's eyes flashed, but, perhaps sensitive to the insinuation Draco had made, he halted and watched Draco carefully instead. Draco sneered back at him.

"You wouldn't have been able to imagine hurting a house-elf this time last month, either," Draco said. "The changes you're going through are the house, all the house. Hurting Kreacher. Desiring me. There's no way that I can trust you."

"I can give you something to trust, something to hang onto," Potter whispered, with a sheer ferocity of tone that might have melted Draco's resolve in other contexts. "What do I have to do to convince you to trust me?"

Draco straightened his back, slowly. He had thought he would have a long tussle with Potter before he got to this point. On the other hand, Potter was pretty new to manipulation himself, and the Black house couldn't make him subtle, it seemed. Only angrier.

Draco waited a few seconds, just to make sure this wasn't some sort of sadistic trick played by Potter's new Black nature, and then cleared his throat. "I want you to make a vow to me. One that you can't alter."

"An Unbreakable Vow?" Potter's eyes flickered off to the side.

Draco grimaced and shook his head. He didn't share the *same* bad memories of Unbreakable Vows that Potter did, but they had haunted his life for some of the same reasons. "No. A vow on your magic and hands."

Potter looked at him again, and there was *fire* in that gaze. Draco shivered a little, and wondered how much was naturally Potter's and how much the house had given him. And how had anyone who was trying to evaluate Potter in the past not noticed? Bellatrix and the Dark Lord had seemed to think Potter was weak, through and through. But Draco didn't think the house could change him that much.

"What will that do?" Potter sounded fascinated for the vow's own sake, not something Draco had expected.

As it happened, though, Draco could tell the truth. "It will keep your magic from hurting me or restraining me, and it'll yank your hands back if they go to places I don't want them to go."

Potter paused, as if consulting with some voice in the back of his head. Why not? Draco thought. Bellatrix had done the same thing sometimes. It was probably part of being mad.

Then Potter smiled. "Even the magic of the Black heir?" he whispered, reaching out and trailing a finger from Draco's wrist up to his elbow.

Draco ignored the finger even when it went under his sleeve, holding Potter's gaze and not looking away. The most important thing he could do right now was get Potter to swear the vow. If that included standing still, he would. "Yes. If you phrase it the right way."

Potter half-closed his eyes and took his hand off. Draco waited, his heart kicking his ribs unmercifully. He wanted this to succeed, and not only because it would make it easier to help Potter get rid of the house's influence—if they could—and free himself from the power of someone who could command Draco so unnervingly to obey him.

He also wanted it because, if controlled and forced to smolder, Potter's fire promised a more exciting year than Draco keeping his voice and eyes to himself did.

*If it can only be controlled.*

\*

Did he *want* to give up the power to hold Draco Malfoy in place by his voice alone, to tell him to shut up and have him listen?

When he thought about it that way, Harry had to curl his lip. Of course he did. He had never wanted that kind of power over anyone. It was all the house's influence, trying to turn him into a Black and corrupt him.

*Really? You never wanted that?*

Fantasies Harry hadn't thought of in years flooded his mind, fantasies in which he grew ten feet taller than Dudley and kicked *him* around, fantasies in which his rich parents showed up to claim him and totally humiliated Uncle Vernon and Aunt Petunia. They didn't mean anything, Harry had told himself after he found out he was a wizard. He had a better reality to compare them to, now.

But they were there. And they proved that he *could* desire power.

Now the question remained whether he desired power or Draco more.

Harry balanced those notions in his head a bit, feeling as though he stood in the middle of a crashing wave. Memories of Malfoy fought recent memories of Draco and the way he had looked directly into Harry's eyes when knocking his hands away and requesting the vow. Memories of how he *used* to act, the Harry Ron and Hermione knew, and the shame he'd felt over hurting Kreacher fought the memories of the recent past and how good it felt, and the memories of how Kreacher had betrayed Sirius.

In the end, the answer wasn't simple, but it *was* clear. He wanted Draco more.

"All right," he said, opening his eyes. "Teach me the vow. The wand movements and the incantations, and *exactly* what you want me to say."

\*

Draco stared at Potter, so surprised he'd won that for a long moment he really couldn't do anything.

Then he clenched his hands into fists and fought back the wave of wonderment. He had come this far, thanks to his own plans and cleverness. So he would play on it, and use this moment to change things between him and Potter.

"Hold up your wand," he said. "Right in front of your lips. Speak the words as if you were whispering to it."

"Horizontally or vertically?" Potter took out the holly wand and held it up.

"Vertically, like that," Draco said, and ignored the way Potter's eyes had gone liquid again. "Make sure that you're holding it with both hands, your dominant hand on top."

"I like the sound of *that*," Potter said, and smiled at him with enough heat to melt a sword.

Draco held himself so still that he knew his mother would be proud, and said, "Say *Spondeo magicum*. Then wait a few heartbeats, and say *Spondeo manus*. Then a few more heartbeats, and say *Spondeo Draconi parcere*."

He thought Potter would need more instruction than that, but he spoke it smoothly, lightly, the deep voice intoning the syllables exactly the way Draco had told him to. And he even waited the exact same time between the first and second vow, and the second and the third, without having to count it aloud.

All the time, his burning eyes watched Draco from beyond the slender barrier of the holly wand as though Draco had become the center of his existence.

Draco had to swallow, and swallow again, to get rid of some of the painful clog in his throat. So. He had Potter sworn to hold back from holding him whenever he wanted, and not to command him. He had a little more freedom than before.

But he was also bound closer to Potter, on a course of "help" that might not work because what

they were seeking might not even exist, and he had to battle a foe that might be more powerful and persistent than Potter's magic: his own desires.

Because those green eyes, now that he saw them like this, really looked nothing like his aunt's.

*It's going to be a delicate dance.*

## Chains of Desire

"I can't find all that much about pure-blood houses, actually."

Harry leaned back in his chair in the library, where Hermione had dragged him that morning, and grunted. The library didn't seem all that enthralling when it wasn't Draco who awaited him there, and still less enthralling was the sight of Hermione frowning into a book, flipping pages as though the answer was going to pop out in front of her.

"It says that they ensnare their heirs, and trap them into enacting the family." Hermione slammed the book down on the table. "But it doesn't say anything about what that *means*."

"Maybe you should try a different book." Harry tried to keep that to a gentle suggestion, instead of the snap he wanted to make. Hermione still looked at him, though.

"Maybe I should," she said. "And maybe you should *help* me. Honestly, Harry, you act like you don't really care about your future at all!"

Harry sneered at her. "That's not true," he said. "Any house that makes me kill and—and makes me over into its image is something I care about." Merlin, he'd almost said "torture house-elves." He didn't mean to tell her about Kreacher. She would act so irrational that she would be no help at all.

And of course he wanted her to be a help. Of course. He wanted free of this house, and he wanted to live.

*If I don't, then I might never see Draco look at me with anything like approval. He might never ask me to break the vow.*

Harry smiled slowly. He was looking forward to that day, the day Draco asked Harry to break the vow and begged Harry to touch him. Harry knew he would enjoy it all the more for the temporary delay in the process.

"Then act like you care," Hermione said, and stood up and walked away among the shelves to put the book back. Harry turned to watch her, wondering where the sullen cold lump in the middle of his stomach that didn't *care* had come from.

It was hard to care about the house because Hermione had turned it into another of her projects, the way she always did when it came to interesting magical things. That meant she researched it and told him what to think. But this time, what she was telling him to think about was himself.

*I don't want her involved.*

Now there was the problem of how to discourage her involvement when she knew full well that something was going on.

"Potter."

Harry turned around with a little start. For a moment, hearing the name had felt wrong, even though

he knew perfectly well that it was in Draco's voice. For a moment, he had thought that the name he should respond to was *Black*.

Draco stood behind him, his face pale. He held a book in his hands that Harry immediately focused on. It was small and black, and there was a musty smell coming from it that—

That made him think of home.

Harry stood up and smiled. "What did you find?"

Draco's eyes flickered for a moment, and Harry had the sensation that he was trying to look away from Harry's smile. Well, that was all right, since he ended up looking back. "My mother sent me this," he said, quietly. Harry nodded approval of his sense. "I asked her if she knew anything about the house or the way it chose its heirs that I might not, and this is what she came up with."

"I'd like to read it," Harry said. "May I?"

He knew that asking instead of just taking would win points with Draco, and he liked the way Draco's eyes widened for a second. Then he glanced around and said, "Yes. But not here. I want to make sure no one overhears us who shouldn't."

"Take me down to the dungeons, then," Harry said. "I can't go up to Gryffindor Tower without a crowd of people emerging to follow me around." It wasn't as true as it would have been in other years, but still true enough to make a good excuse.

Draco hesitated. Harry lowered his voice further. Hermione would come back any second, and he didn't want to be here when she did. "Please?"

Draco nodded jerkily, and led him off. Harry smiled at his back as they walked, or scuttled, out of the library and down towards the dungeons.

*I can't believe how interesting he is.*

\*

Draco didn't know what was in the book, himself. He had brought it to Potter the minute his mother owled it to him. He hoped it would be something interesting about the house, though, something that would make Potter read it.

That might quench the desire that Draco had to keep Potter's eyes focused on *him*. If Potter would just look away for a second instead of staring at him with that hunger, then Draco knew he could recover his breath and his mental balance.

It was his own fault, he had to acknowledge. Well, part of his own fault. He had never asked to become the current obsession of the current Black heir.

But he had wanted Potter's attention, and now he had it. It wasn't so long ago that he had wanted that, and it could still affect him now. Hell, even during the war he'd cherished a few stupid fantasies about Potter coming to his rescue in Malfoy Manor and telling him that he'd done well, holding him, gazing into his eyes as though there was nothing he wanted more than to throw Draco on the ground.

Those fantasies had been okay because they would never happen. And because he knew enough Occlumency to bury them from the Dark Lord's probing gaze. The Dark Lord would never be looking for them, since everyone knew Draco hated Potter.

But those desires made his desire more potent now, and when they finally reached a little out of the way corridor in the dungeons that not many Slytherins came down, Draco turned and thrust the book at Potter as a kind of shield.

Potter took it, still smiling at him, and opened it. Draco cocked his head to look at the writing. His mother hadn't sent much of an explanation with her letter, only a vague note about how it would help them, and the book itself had no title or author, and only two blank pages in the front when Draco had taken a look at it earlier.

Potter caught his breath. "It's a journal," he whispered, and turned a few pages. "I can't tell who it's by yet, other than someone who was afraid that the house was choosing them as an heir." He shut the book and turned to Draco, his eyes burning. "How did your mother get hold of this? It should have been at the house. She wasn't the heir."

*And now we have to deal with this.* Draco sighed. "I don't know. She didn't tell me. Are you going to accuse her of stealing your property or something? You have it back now. So that shouldn't be a problem."

Potter wavered for a second, his breath catching and his eyes blinking shut and open as though they could focus on something else if he forced them to. Then he shook his head, smiled, and patted Draco on the shoulder. "You're right. I should be happy that it was returned to me." He slid the journal into his pocket with a snap.

"Aren't you going to read it?" Draco asked. He understood if Potter wanted to look at the book in private, but he had expected him to run off and read it, in that case. It might have the solution he wanted to getting free.

"No," Potter said, his voice sinking a little. "I wanted to ask you about something else." He tilted his chin back and patted his neck. "The scars on my neck are changing, but I'm not sure that the number Hermione said she saw was a 1 or really just a scratch. Look closely at it and tell me what you see."

Draco rolled his eyes, but leaned in. He had the vow to keep Potter from using too much "persuasion" on him, and he had to admit he was curious to see what the silver scars looked like.

Too much like his own Potter-inflicted scars for comfort, it turned out. Some were parallel, and some formed a spiral around a symbol. Draco frowned.

"Granger must have some problems with her eyes she's never acknowledged," he said. Potter stirred, but didn't retort, the way he would have ordinarily at any insult to her friends. "That's not a 1. That's a 2."

"What?"

Draco looked up sharply. Potter had laid his hand against his throat, and his eyes were wide and shocked.

Draco wordlessly conjured a mirror and held it up. Potter took it, stared into it, and then shut his



eyes and slumped to the floor.

“I have to get free of this,” he whispered.

Draco decided that he could finally move. Potter seemed to be saner than he had been in a long time, not leering at Draco and not acting as though he *wanted* to be possessed by the house. Maybe this was the time that he would accept Draco’s suggestion.

“I have an idea,” he said. “I thought of it the other evening.”

Potter immediately surged to his feet. “What?”

“We need to go to the house,” Draco said, shivering a little. He didn’t want to do that, but he hated the thought of having to dance around Potter for the rest of his life more. “Take me there.”

Potter smiled at him, and Draco hoped the sane moment hadn’t passed. The flame in his eyes was dark. “Leave that to me.”

Draco grimaced. In hindsight, he rather suspected he shouldn’t have used the word *take*.

## Home of Darkness

Harry kept his hands from visibly trembling by sticking them into his pockets. He had the intuition that it wouldn't be a good idea to show too much of their trembling to Draco, who was nervous enough already.

And he honestly wasn't sure whether they were shaking with excitement because he had seen that the book was Bellatrix's journal of when she had almost become the house's heir, or with fear because the scar on his neck had turned to a 2...

Or out of sheer and savage desire.

Draco was coming with him to the house. *Draco was coming with him to the house.*

Harry hadn't set foot in it since the day he killed the Kneazle. He hadn't wanted to, and not just because of the hold it had on him. He didn't want to go back into those grimy corners, still grimy no matter what he did. He hadn't wanted to see Kreacher. He hadn't wanted to try and find an answer there, because the cost of the answers would end up being too high.

But with someone else beside him, he almost looked forward to showing the house off, grimy corners and all. If Kreacher was there, well, Draco had grown up in a family that had its own house-elves. He would know how to deal with Kreacher and his demands in ways that *didn't* involve injuring him.

Really, Draco was the best companion Harry could have on a trip to the house, even excluding Ron and Hermione.

*Who I don't really want around anyway.*

\*

Potter's idea of a "perfect" time to go to the house turned out to be after dinner, only a few hours before curfew.

Draco grimaced and thought about objecting, but in the end, he couldn't. What would he say? The solution he had in mind, although vague and tentative, really did depend on going to the house, and especially on seeing the Black family tapestry. And if he told Potter about it and left him to execute it on his own, he would get it all wrong. Potter just didn't know *enough* about pure-blood houses and the way that pure-blood families worked.

Hell, Draco couldn't say that he knew much more. The way Malfoy Manor chose and adapted its heirs was just so different. Even most of the tales of other houses he'd heard didn't involve things like *this*. The Blacks were the only ones who had wanted all the different good qualities an heir might bring to the family molded and changed so that they became the same personality, generation after generation.

Draco had long suspected that the Blacks married cousins and had the same looks out of the same rule of similarity. They had to have used *some* spells on themselves to keep everyone looking identical, dark hair and dark eyes and heavy faces, generation after generation, when they were

intermarrying with other pure-blood families who had their own distinctive, and famous, looks. Draco was just grateful that the blood, or the magic, had failed with his own mother, and with him.

In the house, therefore, was still the best way to figure out what was magic and what was coincidence, and the solution to their problems.

\*

Harry Apparated from outside of Hogwarts with Draco clinging to his arm. No one kept as close a watch on the eighth-year students as they did on the younger years, and it wasn't hard to come and go as they pleased.

No, for Harry the hard thing was to remember the vow he had sworn, and not simply touch more than Draco's hand. If he did that, then Draco would probably distrust him, and coming to the house with him, off school grounds, was already a show of greater trust than Harry had expected.

But they got through the Apparition without incident, and appeared across the street from Grimmauld Place. Draco started beside him, and when Harry looked over at him, he found Draco wrinkling his nose and looking around at the walking, hurrying Muggles.

"This house is in the middle of a Muggle city?" Draco asked.

Harry shrugged and led the way across the road, between the darting cars. "I assume that the Blacks cared more about staying in the same place they always had than about being surrounded with Muggles."

Draco sneered as he caught up with Harry on the doorstep. "Yes, that sounds like them. They could probably pretend they were more persecuted than ever because they'd chosen to exist with enemies surrounding them."

*"Don't denigrate them."*

Harry turned around to see who was speaking before he realized that voice had come out of his own throat. He closed his eyes and touched his mouth. It was long moments before he dared to look at Draco.

Draco was pale around the lips, but he met Harry's eyes with more of a sardonic smile than Harry had imagined he would dare. "Yeah, Potter. That kind of thing? Is why we need to break you free of this house as soon as possible."

Harry didn't argue, only turned and touched the door. It opened without need of a key, just as the wards had spread back like curtains the minute he approached. The house knew its master, whether or not he wanted to be it.

They stepped into the entrance hall, and Draco shivered. Harry raised his wand and cast a Warming Charm. He felt perfectly comfortable in the house, but then, he had already accepted that his responses to it weren't rational.

"What did you need to see?" he asked, after a moment when he waited for Draco to admire the house, and Draco stared at him, and Harry realized that neither of them were getting what they wanted.

“The family tapestry,” Draco said, and craned his neck around as though he expected it to be hanging on one of the ground floor walls.

Harry nodded briskly. “This way.” At least, when Draco was following him with quick steps, Harry could imagine he had come into the house for shelter and protection, not for a purely utilitarian purpose.

And did he want to imagine that?

*Yes, I do.* And he wouldn’t question his motives for it. You couldn’t question your motives about *everything*.

\*

Draco had known before what the Blacks were doing, but not how. How the house shaped their heirs. Why there was so much difference between what they did and what a house like Malfoy Manor did to Draco once he had become the heir.

Now he knew. There was shadow in every inch of this place, breathing behind every door. Draco wouldn’t be surprised to learn that there were Dark artifacts embedded in the walls of the house, not to be used but to increase the general Darkness of the magic that the heirs came into contact with from the time they were children. The house was cold, comfortless, cheerless, oppressive. Draco would be glad when they could get back out into the clean sunshine again.

In the meantime, he amused himself idly with watching Potter move along in front of him and wondering if the other boy even noticed the way that the house bore down on him. If he was that at home here already, Draco’s idea might not work no matter how good it was.

But he shook it off as they stepped into the room that held the family tapestry. It was still beautiful, despite the spots of mold on it and the many burned patches where various children had been struck off. Draco dropped down in front of it and traced his finger down the silver line that recorded his mother’s marriage and his own birth.

“Look at this, Potter,” he said a moment later, turning his head.

Potter did. There was a silver line blossoming beneath Draco’s finger, growing brighter as he watched it. It led from Dorea Black down through James Potter to Harry Potter, and shone like quicksilver.

“There,” Draco said, sitting back. “That was what I wanted to know. Whether you were on the tapestry as an heir, and what it would mean if you weren’t.”

“What was your idea?” Potter was so close now that his warm breath traveled in puffs over Draco’s ear. Draco had to cant his head to the side to get away from it.

“Three of us are on the tapestry as living descendants of the family,” Draco said, nodding at the wall again. “Not my cousin Teddy Lupin, I know, because my aunt Andromeda was blasted off it for marrying a Muggleborn, and so her descendants don’t count either. But if I’m right, Potter, the main reason that you’re reacting the way you are is that you’re *sole* heir, sole owner of the house and the money and the rest of it.”

Potter had gone still. “Go on,” he said, softly.

“My mother and I still count as descendants of Black,” Draco said. “Not everything relates to direct blood descent, or my cousin Sirius couldn’t have made you the heir of Black even if he wanted to. It should have come to my mother or Bellatrix instead when he died.” He thought he saw Potter touch the book inside his pocket as he spoke, but he ignored it for the moment. “If you could try and transfer some of the money to me and my mother, even if you can’t transfer the house, that would mean you’re not sole heir anymore. It might lessen the influence of the house on you.”

Potter seemed to be struggling for breath and words for a second. Then he said, “If that’s possible, why did no other Black heir ever try it before?”

Draco snorted. “Because, if they were raised here and stayed here for a solid period of time after they were of age, then they wouldn’t *want* to release anything. They would enjoy being the Black heir, a lot more than you do. It’s the same reason that the process of disinheriting yourself won’t work. It’s a long process, and by the end, you would be Black enough to decide you’d rather stay the way you were.” He turned to Potter. “But if you can start to give away some of your money now, while you still have will enough to resist, then it might achieve the same result as a formal disinheritance of you without taking as long.”

Potter was silent, his head bowed. Draco frowned. He hadn’t thought Potter was Black enough *yet* to resent the idea of giving up his money. “Potter?”

Potter raised his head. His eyes were glazed and deep, and he smiled once before he said, “No,” and drew his wand.

As he lifted it, a moment before the vow went into effect, Draco noticed that the silver scars on his throat had changed to a 3.

*Oh, bloody wonderful.*

## Spreading the Inheritance

One minute Harry was leaning forwards and spitting his spell right in Malfoy's face, this *traitor* who would dispute that Harry was the head of the House of Black, who would try to take his inheritance away—

And then he was flying away, hitting the wall so hard that his back spasmed and his hands flew wide. His wand clattered away from him and rolled into a fair corner. Harry flexed his hands and stared at them. For a moment, his wrists glowed with a white light he hadn't seen before, soft but savage, before it faded and they looked just as they'd always been.

"The vow you swore did that."

Harry looked up, startled. Malfoy was standing in front of him, his hands on his hips and his gaze, fastened on Harry, more confident than Harry had seen it since they started school. He shook his head and rolled his eyes when Harry looked at him, and then sat down on the floor in front of him and started ticking off points on his fingers.

"First, you swore that you wouldn't touch me without my permission. Putting your wand against my throat violates that.

"Second, you swore you wouldn't use magic against me. I don't know what spell it would have been, but anything that had harmful intent behind it and wasn't something like cleaning me up or healing me would have invoked the vow."

Harry scowled at his hands. It no longer seemed as good an idea as it had to swear that vow.

"Third," Malfoy said, leaning towards him and nearly violating the vow himself by almost letting his nose graze Harry's, "you just swore that vow yesterday. It's always stronger when it's more recent."

For a moment, Harry's hands clenched again. He wondered if that meant he just had to wait until the vow grew old, and then it would go away and he would be able to hurt Malfoy again.

*But I didn't think you wanted to? I thought you desired him?*

The voice sounded like Hermione, which made Harry flinch for all kinds of reasons right now, but it also broke through the mist that seemed to have clouded his mind since the moment Malfoy had suggested splitting up the Black money. Harry gave a soft moan and lowered his head into his hands. He could feel Malfoy watching him, but he knew that he wasn't in the best shape to look up and match wits with him at the moment.

"Listen," Malfoy told him softly. "I know it's hard. But I also don't think this is you. Most of what you've done recently can be explained by reference to the house. Black heirs were sole heirs, no matter how many siblings they had. Those siblings might get an allowance while their parents were alive, but after they died, it depended on the heir's generosity. You reacted violently when I suggested splitting up the inheritance because any Black heir would have."

Harry looked up. "I don't want to because I haven't had much money all my life, and I want to

*keep this.*”

Malfoy snorted and dropped down in front of him, looking at Harry with a tolerant sort of expression that Harry hated. “All right. Pretend that I was your Potter cousin who had appeared out of nowhere and wanted you to split up the Potter fortune to help support me. Would you agree?”

Harry waited for the instinctive flinch of rejection, and flushed when he didn’t feel it. “That’s different,” he muttered. “I would be so happy to finally have family that I wouldn’t care what you wanted, I would give it to you to keep you around.”

That made Malfoy peer at him. “You had family. You were raised by family.”

Harry bared his teeth, because if there was one thing he hated more than the thought of giving up the Black fortune to Malfoy, it was the thought of discussing the Dursleys with Malfoy. “They don’t count.”

Malfoy eyed him as if wondering whether to pursue things, and then held out his hands and shrugged, showing he had chosen the smarter thing to do, which was to drop it. “Fine. They don’t count. But I still think this is the house, and not you. Is it so bad, giving up the money, when you have things to gain out of it?”

Harry folded his arms. His head ached, and his throat ached, and his *neck* ached, in the place where the bloody Kneazle had given him the bloody scars. “Convince me that I would gain something more if I gave the money up.”

\*

Draco closed his eyes. He hadn’t lived through the war because he wanted to become a counselor to Harry bloody Potter. He *hadn’t*. And he didn’t want to give the answer he knew Potter wanted to hear.

“You could gain the respect of your friends,” he said, staring at the Black family tapestry instead. “You could be the way you should have been after the end of the war. You would have—”

“That doesn’t sound like enough.”

Draco snapped. That was the only word he could find for it later, the sense that chains in his head had simply parted and flown off. He turned around, and whatever Potter saw in his face, it was enough to make him shrink away with his eyes fixed on Draco. Maybe Draco shouldn’t have felt proud of that, but he did. He smiled and crowded closer.

“You’ll never have me, if that’s what you’re worried about,” he hissed. “If you continue the way you are. Do you *want* to be like this, Potter? Jealous and snappish and prone to using Dark magic and torturing house-elves at the flick of an eyebrow? I tell you what, I don’t want to be with someone like that. And it doesn’t matter how rich he is or how he’s the head of the Black family, I *won’t*.”

“I could still command you to be.” Potter’s eyes had begun to glow with that dangerous fire.

Draco folded his arms and struck a pose he was far from feeling. “Fine. Show me how you’re going to command me, then.”

Potter opened his mouth, frowned, then said, as if talking to someone else, “But if I did that, then you would have every reason to resent me later.”

“Exactly.” Draco took a step closer and stared into his eyes. Potter glared at him, and Draco had to brace his body not to turn and run when that happened. But he was still going to remain there, and Potter would just have to get used to the fact. And he was still *right*, which Potter would also have to get used to. “You can’t get what you want by acting like the Black heir. But you might if you let it pass, and give some of your money to my mother and me.”

He wouldn’t reveal how much they needed that money, if Potter would give it. It was a legal transaction that the Ministry couldn’t interfere with, because it would involve blood relatives. Otherwise, Draco knew, there was a good chance that they would try to prevent Narcissa and Draco from receiving any money.

Potter gnawed his lip. Then he said, “But if I change back to normal, then I don’t think I’ll want you anymore.”

Draco swallowed. They were talking about it more openly, sooner, than he had thought would happen. But he pushed his face closer to Potter’s than ever, and said, “Think about why you want me now. Why?”

\*

Harry hesitated. He could say lots of things to Malfoy, and Malfoy would never know if they were the truth or not.

*Maybe.*

But it was also true that Malfoy was watching him with hard eyes, and he had been wiser and more observant about Harry than Harry had ever known he could be. So maybe it was best to tell the truth.

“I want you because you’re pretty,” Harry whispered. “And you’re paying attention to me, and you know something about this and you’re still helping me, which is more than anyone else is doing.”

“Your friend Granger looked pretty busy with research the last time I saw her,” Malfoy retorted. “And you *forced* me into agreeing to help you, remember?”

Harry looked away. The world seemed to slip and balance sideways. On the one hand, he knew what Malfoy said was true; he could remember it. And he could remember the conversation with Hermione when he could have been harder and forced her to back off if he really didn’t want her help investigating the house.

But he hadn’t. And whose fault was that, if he wasn’t loud or serious enough to convince his friends to stay away?

Why did he *want* them to stay away?

Harry rubbed his forehead wearily. He was starting to think that he didn’t know what he was thinking, and that only made it all the more terrifying.

“I want you because you’re alluring right now,” he said quietly. “And let’s go to Gringotts and



start transferring the money, before I change my mind.”

Malfoy hesitated. Then he said, “We can’t walk in there *right now*.”

“Why not?” Harry pushed himself back to his feet. “This is the best I’ve felt in a long time, the most *clear-headed* I’ve felt in a long time. And we’re both of age. They won’t refuse to serve us.”

Malfoy nodded so slowly that it seemed likely he’d still refuse, then peered again at Harry’s neck. “Strange,” he whispered.

“What?”

“I thought the scar on your neck had changed to a three,” Malfoy said. “But it’s only a two.”

Harry swallowed. If that was true and not just a trick of the light or Malfoy’s eyes, then he hoped this was a step in the right direction.

He could *hope* so, even if he couldn’t be sure.

“Let’s go to Gringotts,” he said. “I’m sick of being here.”

And with the sideways vision that had come to him lately, he watched Malfoy’s arse on the way down, and wondered if he should.

## Heir to the House of Black

Harry looked up at the doors of Gringotts, and sighed. He doubted the goblins would want to do him any favors, since he had broken into the place and ridden out on a dragon. And now he was coming to tamper with inheritance procedures, something Hermione had once told him the goblins took very seriously.

But he wasn't taking money out of the bank, just moving it around from vault to vault. Maybe that would be enough.

When he walked in, there was a moment of intense silence, as goblins counting piles of coins shifted closer to them and others simply turned around and glared. Harry set his shoulders. Maybe he ought to be glad that he was uncomfortable. It made him feel more like himself. The heir of the House of Black, the way they were *meant* to be, would have just looked through the goblins as not worth bothering with and strode straight ahead.

Harry went to the nearest goblin instead, who might be familiar, but he wasn't sure. The goblin sneered down at him and pushed some of the coins out of the way, his claws lingering over the Galleons as if he needed to count them and be sure to count them again after Harry had left. "Yes, Mr. Potter?"

Harry glanced back once, to make sure that Malfoy was still with him. Malfoy raised his eyebrows and nodded. Harry supposed that was what he got for trying to rely on someone like him. Malfoy didn't think that goblins had rights, or at least he hadn't been of that opinion the last time Harry asked.

"I want to see someone about transferring some of the money in my Black vaults to Malfoy vaults," he said.

The goblin's eyes narrowed so far that they almost disappeared. Then he said, "Wait here," and jumped down behind the counter, vanishing.

Harry blinked. That was different from the response he'd got almost every other time he was here, but perhaps it meant something good. He stood there and tried to ignore the curious stares of the other wizards in the bank. There weren't many, this hour of the evening, and he didn't think they'd realized who he was yet, but it was only a matter of time.

The goblin came back around the counter, and stared at Harry for a long time, as if he couldn't believe that he'd dared to come here and ask this. Harry put his chin up and swallowed. He was still going to do this.

The goblin finally grunted and said, "It's not my problem," to the world in general, before turning on his heel. "Cushfoot, the head goblin in charge of the Black vaults, will see you now," he added over his shoulder.

Harry grimaced and followed him. He was turning over in his mind what the goblin had said. *Head goblin in charge of the Black vaults? How many worked under him?*

*How many fucking vaults did the Blacks have, anyway?*

Prickles running down Harry's spine made him wish he'd found out before now.

\*

Draco kept a careful expression on his face as they were ushered into a blank stone office with locked boxes climbing up the walls. He knew the way to deal with goblins. Keep it short, keep it polite, and keep it legal. They were geniuses at twisting legal contracts around to ensnare people, and even some of Draco's ancestors had fallen victim to them in their time, usually because they thought goblins too far beneath humans to take them seriously.

Now, Draco knew the lesson.

He wasn't sure if Potter did or not. He hunched his shoulders, and he hadn't said anything offensive so far, but that didn't actually reassure Draco. It might be too much for Potter and burst out of him in the end. Draco would have trusted true calmness better than this version.

"Mr. Potter? I am Cushfoot."

The goblin who stood up behind his desk and regarded them as they came into room was taller than any Draco had seen. He had long claws on his hands, immaculately cut and a pearly color that was also unusual. His eyes were golden, and tracked them with utter polite indifference. Draco would have chosen him, if he was human, to wait on him in any shop. He promised discretion and speed and good service.

But to a goblin, those values didn't always mean the same things as they would to a human.

"Mr. Cushfoot," Potter said, and then seemed to realize that he had no idea what to say next, and trailed off awkwardly.

Cushfoot gave him no help. He sat down behind the desk, which gleamed as if it was made of black glass, and folded his hands, regarding Potter attentively.

Potter finally cleared his throat and forged ahead. "I would like to transfer some money from the Black vaults to the Malfoy vaults."

Cushfoot bowed. "It can be done," he said, and pulled a few pieces of parchment towards him. "How many Galleons were you thinking of?"

Potter hesitated, then said, "I don't know. How much is currently in the Black vaults?"

Cushfoot gave a tiny sigh, as if he couldn't believe that he was dealing with a human so abysmally ignorant of his own money. "You currently have a sum three Knuts short of a million Galleons, Mr. Potter," he recited. "That is in the main vault. There are two satellite vaults, which would ordinarily have provided for minor branches of the family, but are now yours since there are no minor branches of the family left. The one that originally belonged to Cygnus Black now has three hundred thousand Galleons in it. The one that provided support for Lycoris Black has two hundred thousand, seven hundred sixteen Galleons in it."

Potter sat there as if dazed for a second. Then he snapped, "But wait a second. There are still minor branches of the family. What about the Malfoys and the—the Lestranges?" He had probably just remembered that Aunt Andromeda wasn't on the Black family tree and wouldn't have any money,

Draco decided.

“They do not count, under the Black family will,” said Cushfoot, folding his hands again, “because they produced no children with the name of Black.”

“I’m not named Black, either.” Potter glared at the goblin from under a strand of dark hair. Draco shivered again. If Potter would apply the green fire in his eyes *properly*, then he would indeed be a force to be reckoned with.

And for different reasons than he was right now.

“Yes, but you were legally designated heir by someone who was,” said Cushfoot, with an expression that suggested he didn’t give these kinds of explanations every day, and thank Merlin for that. “That overrides the issue of name.”

Potter visibly gave up, and nodded. “Then I’d like to spread the sum of a—a thousand Galleons into the Malfoy vaults, please.”

“From which of the Black vaults?” Cushfoot took up a quill and studied Potter as if he’d been waiting all along for this.

Potter visibly flailed for a second, then straightened and all but snapped, “The vault that was intended to sustain Cygnus’s family.”

Cushfoot nodded and wrote something down, a long, looping scrawl that started on one side of the parchment and didn’t end until the other, as far as Draco could tell. Then he pushed it across the desk. “Sign here.”

Potter picked up the quill and leaned forwards as if he was about to sign, *unthinkingly*. Draco reached up and caught his wrist. Cushfoot glanced at Draco for the first time, the same indifferent way that he’d looked at Potter when he first came into the office.

“What?” Potter snapped, turning his head and giving Draco the benefit of his glare, this time. “Given that this is going to help your family, you’d think you could be a little more goddamned grateful.” He tried to pull away from Draco’s grip, the tendons in his arm tightening as he did.

“Read it first, Potter,” Draco said harshly. “Always make sure that you read something a goblin gives you.”

“The young Malfoy shows good business sense,” said Cushfoot, nodding.

“Then why didn’t you tell me to read it?” Potter demanded, swiveling back to Cushfoot.

“Because you did not ask me for advice,” Cushfoot said, without turning a hair.

Potter snarled and bent over to read the goblin’s scrawl. Draco read it above his shoulder.

It said exactly what Potter had requested that it say, with the addition of one clause about objections from any other Black heirs. Draco didn’t see why that should matter. He and his mother were the only ones left; Andromeda and her grandson had no way to challenge it.

Potter signed with a flourish and started to pass the parchment back to Cushfoot. Cushfoot touched

it with one nail and said something in a language so jagged that Draco doubted it was normal Gobbledygook.

The parchment sizzled, and a black mist rose from it. Potter jerked back. “What does that mean?” he demanded.

“That means that another Black heir has to be heard from,” Cushfoot said, in a hollow, soft voice.

“But you said—”

“The house itself, Mr. Potter.” Cushfoot’s eyes glittered as the black mist formed into an approximation of jaws. “The house itself deserves a chance to speak.”

## Voice of the Past

The voice that came out of the black jaws the smoke had formed would remain with Harry for a long time. The hisses and the snarls of it, the sheer *darkness* of it, and the disgust it provoked in him made him back up until he hit the door of Cushfoot's office.

Then he remembered where he was, and that both Malfoy and the goblin were watching him, and did his best to stand straight and shake off his idiocy. So the house could talk. It was no creepier than Kreacher knowingly sending him out into the garden to kill a Kneazle, and knowing the Kneazle would claw the shit out of him if it got the chance.

It really wasn't.

He stilled the trembling in his limbs by lobbing some insults at himself, mentally, of the kind that Dudley would have used. *Do you want to act like a baby? Little baby Harry, in front of the house and Draco and the goblin who's served your adopted family for a long time and seen a lot harder people than you?*

That got him to listen, at least, and if he missed a few words, it didn't seem to matter. The house was taking a long time to say anything worthwhile.

"I say that there is one heir, and only one. The one who lives within my walls, and walks down my corridors. The one who sleeps within my embrace. The one who owns the house-elf who serves in me. The one who slew the creature that I sent to him to test him. He cannot send the money that belongs to him elsewhere. He has not yet confronted the *true* test of the Black heir, or passed it. Until he does, he has no right to other Black property. I will welcome him, if he returns. I will not give him passage to other vaults."

The jaws shuddered, and hovered above the paper for a second as if they would open and snap at him again. Harry wouldn't have put it past them. He had to fight to keep his expression calm and his hands resting in front of him.

Then the smoke dissipated, and Cushfoot leaned forwards and slid his claws slowly along the words he had written. "It seems that another heir does object," he said, "after all."

"*How?*" It was good to let the fear transform into anger, Harry found, and the darkness of the jaws and the smoke that had formed them was nothing next to the blackness that hovered around the edges of his vision now. He took a long stride forwards and stood there staring at Cushfoot, who examined his claws and didn't seem alarmed. "How can the house be an heir to itself? And how can all its words apply to me? I own the house-elf, but I don't sleep there now, and I don't live there. I'm at *Hogwarts*. I'm a *student*."

There was a long pause, and Cushfoot looked up. "You're not living in the house?"

"Not at the moment," Harry said, trying for the haughty tone that he imagined some of the goblin's Black employers would have used in the past. Then he remembered that he didn't *want* to be like them, and did his best to compensate by folding his arms and glaring at Cushfoot. "I'm a student at *Hogwarts*. I live in Gryffindor Tower."

“The heir of Black chose a new heir of Black who is a Gryffindor,” Cushfoot told his office, and reached out to tap the parchment he’d signed again. “The house still says that you are a Black in name only, and you have to face the final test of a Black heir before it will acknowledge your right to transfer money to the Malfoy vaults.”

Harry stared over his shoulder at Malfoy. Malfoy gave him a small nod, confirming Harry’s worst fears. If he faced that test, he would become the true Black heir—but he would also want nothing to do with giving the house up, or giving money to the Malfoys. Doing what the house wanted was what he had to avoid at all costs.

Then Harry had a thought, and turned back towards Cushfoot. “I still want to know how the house can be an heir to itself,” he said, his heart beating rapidly.

Cushfoot smiled at him, an empty smile. “It is not precisely an heir to itself, Mr. Potter.” From the way he paused on the last word, Harry thought he had almost said “Mr. Black” instead. “But it is an entity involved in the negotiations. Of course it has chosen who it wishes to belong to.”

“I was told that the process of disinheriting myself is a long one,” Harry said. He didn’t look towards Malfoy, just in case he could get in trouble for being a source of that information.

“Indeed.” Cushfoot lost the smile and inclined his head as if tucking his chin into his chest, his eyes never leaving Harry. “I would not suggest trying it.”

Harry waved his hand at him. “But what if I made another entity involved in the negotiations? It would be a bad thing if I died without an heir, right? So I should have one.”

Cushfoot drew himself up as if Harry had put a snake in front of him. Probably more than that, in fact, Harry thought. A snake wouldn’t be a threat to his precious money. “Mr. *Potter*. When you have children, of course, the house will—”

“But there’s already someone alive who would have inherited the house if Sirius Black hadn’t named me in his will,” Harry interrupted. “A few people, in fact. What if I make Narcissa and Draco Malfoy my heirs? What happens then?”

Cushfoot stared at him some more. Harry thought he heard a snarl in the back of his mind. He smiled. *Suck it, house.*

\*

*What? You can’t do that, Potter.*

Draco stared at Potter’s back, and tried to convey the information to him by silent osmosis. But apparently Potter had never heard of that process and that he needed to remain aware of what Draco was doing at all times so that a silent Malfoy message could reach him. He just continued looking at Cushfoot, who continued looking at him.

Draco had to admit that he hadn’t thought of Potter making him a formal heir. Or his mother, either. Why would he? The process of disinheritance would have taken too long, requiring weeks and months that Potter could fall further under the house’s sway, and by the end of it, or before the end of it, Potter would have refused to go through with it. And damaging the house wasn’t something Potter would allow anyone to do, either, as long as it was controlling his brain this much.

But making someone an heir without disinheriting yourself...

Draco felt a little ashamed for not thinking of it before, actually. It was brilliant.

"Mr. Potter." Cushfoot's voice was low and without passion, but Draco could see the way his hands tightened on the edges of the desk, and the grooves his nails dug. "Apparently you are unaware of the way that these negotiations work. The house is an ancient partner in the agreement. You are a new partner, but you were made heir by a designated heir, so you can take part in the negotiation even though you have no blood."

"And now I would be making someone else heir." Potter gave Cushfoot a cutting smile that Draco knew from experience could sharpen if someone didn't do what he wanted. "The same way Sirius did. You can't tell me that I can't do that. Sirius made his will naming me as the—the new Black while he was still alive. Why can't I do the same thing now?"

Cushfoot seemed to relax as though someone had taken some of the bones from his shoulders. "If you would like to designate Mr. Malfoy or his mother as your heirs in your will, that can, of course, be done, Mr. Potter." He nodded at Draco, who would have liked to back away. Luckily for his dignity, he was backed away as far as he could go, with his shoulders already against the wall, so he settled for staring. Cushfoot turned away as if dismissing Draco and studied Potter. "I can bring the forms, and we can take a sample of blood from your fingers. I'm sure this would be acceptable, as Mr. Malfoy and his mother have more recent Black blood than you do."

But Potter was shaking his head, and held up his hand as though Cushfoot would have to break past it to talk to him. "I don't want to just name them in my will. I want to name them now." He lowered his voice when Cushfoot went back to the staring. "Surely that's acceptable? There must have been lots of times when a Black who currently owned the house named their heir before they died, in case something happened."

Cushfoot almost scraped the edge of his desk again, but this time held up his nails to his face and examined them instead. "Of course that has happened," he said, and his voice was edged and jangling. It was the most upset Draco had ever heard a Gringotts goblin sound. "But you forget. You are still Black *heir*, and not owner." He looked Potter in the eye once more, with the smile that said he'd found a solution to the difficulty. "You have not gone through the final test to prove that you are worthy to claim the house."

"But you said I owned the house, and the vaults," Potter said.

Draco blinked. He wouldn't have expected Potter to remember legal language like that, no matter how simple. Well, maybe the simplicity and the fact that Cushfoot had said it five minutes ago combined in his mind to give him the ability.

With a rigid face, Cushfoot reached out and placed his hand on the paper. "Only two parties are named in the negotiation between you and the house," he whispered. "You, and the *house*. You cannot bring new people into it."

"Tell me why not." Potter had the stubborn shift to his head that Draco liked to think of as his "Chosen One" pose. It meant that if *he* saw no trouble with what he was proposing, there was no reason for anyone to see it, either.

Cushfoot looked at him. Potter didn't back down or back away. Cushfoot finally turned to Draco.



“Perhaps *you* would like to explain it, Mr. Malfoy?”

“I have no idea why he can’t claim me as heir,” Draco said. “Yes, he was named heir, but he must also be owner now, and he should have someone who could claim the house if he died.” When Cushfoot didn’t say anything, Draco decided to take a gamble. “If he died without an heir, it would break the continuity of the Blacks. And then I believe the Ministry owns any property still in the vaults?”

Cushfoot studied Draco in turn, but Draco had learned enough about this particular goblin to escape being intimidated by him. He wanted the Blacks to continue to exist, that was plain, and at the moment, Potter was the only one who could guarantee that.

Cushfoot finally bowed, said, “I will go and get you the forms,” and stomped out of the room.

Draco turned to Potter, ready to share the triumph, and lost his smile at the flame he could see shining in Potter’s eyes. He raised his hands in front of him, wondering if he should have insisted on bringing his wand. It seemed that Potter was about to burst out again at the thought of sharing the Black property, even though he had been the one to suggest this particular division of it.

But instead Potter whispered, “You were *brilliant*,” and took a long step towards him. “Can I—can I touch you?”

## Contact

Harry could feel the emotions burning and twitching in him as he waited for Draco to say yes. And he had to say it, didn't he? He was staring at Harry with an expression on his face that made it *inevitable*. Of *course* it would happen.

He couldn't be scared, not when he had heard Harry offer to share the vaults and everything else with him. Harry was the one who had come up with that idea, not Draco. Just spreading around some Galleons seemed petty now. Harry could afford to give Draco and his mother more of what he had, especially when he hadn't wanted it in the first place and would have given up everything just to have Sirius back alive.

He felt another twitch at the back of his mind at that. The house wouldn't want him to think that way, he knew.

But for once, he was free of the house and what it wanted. And that made his emotions stronger, his reactions more genuine. He took another step towards Draco, although he was smart enough to keep his hands to himself until he had permission. Being thrown across the room once wasn't a pleasant experience.

Draco's mouth opened. Harry could see his lips trembling, his tongue quivering between his teeth. He wanted to reach in and touch it. It was getting harder to keep his hands down at his sides.

Then there came the soft scrape of Cushfoot's steps returning. Draco turned his head away and closed his eyes. Harry moved back with a huff that he didn't bother to keep quiet. He thought goblins wouldn't care about humans and their silly touching unless it directly affected the money they handled for them.

But he did resent Cushfoot for interrupting the moment, and glared at him as he came into the office. Cushfoot paused once, then laid the papers he carried on the desk and took his seat again.

"These papers will declare one person your heir," he said, indicating the thickest set of parchments. "You will have to fill out the second set for the other person. And you need to answer questions about what you will give them access to while you are alive, and why you want them as your heirs. You can take those away to fill them out, but they need to be *signed* in the bank."

Harry nodded and picked up the parchments. He suspected Cushfoot was hoping that Harry would take the papers away and just never bring them back, but Harry was just as glad that he would get a chance to consider them at length. This was the kind of thing he could tell Hermione about, and she would help him, and even think it was a good idea.

*When did I start wanting her involved again?*

Harry shrugged. It didn't matter, he thought, as long as they were moving closer to a solution, and a day when Draco might let Harry do *everything* he wanted to do.

"We should get back to Hogwarts," Harry said, turning around and smiling at Draco so that the next words would come as less of a shock. "Don't you think so, Draco?"

Draco stared at him as though hearing his first name come out of Harry's mouth was simply something he couldn't *accept*. But then he nodded jerkily, and cleared his throat, and stepped away as though putting more distance between them would kill Harry's desire. "Let's go," he said, and walked out of the office.

Harry smiled fondly at his back. He could wait a while for Draco to get used to him, to sharing the Black fortune and the houses and property and being touched. Because that was what he wanted, Draco willing. It was the only way he might stay with Harry when he got used to being the Black co-heir and the hold of the house on Harry started fading.

"Mr. Potter."

Harry turned reluctantly to face Cushfoot. The goblin had been helpful, but only from a certain perspective, and Harry really wanted to get back to Hogwarts.

Cushfoot squinted at him, and tapped his claws once on the side of the desk. If he was aware of the grooves they had already cut in the wood, he ignored them magnificently. "Making more people heirs will not free you from the hold of the house."

Harry tilted his head. "Then why did you object to it?"

"Because it will do *nothing*," Cushfoot tapped his fingers one more time, and then leaned back and assumed a bland expression between one of Harry's blinks and another one. "Nothing matters until you face the ordeal that will make you the real heir."

"Are you on the house's side, or what?" Harry demanded. "Do you *want* the house to change me into a horrible person?"

Cushfoot shook his head. "I do not take sides in human debates as you understand them," he said. "I wish for continuity. If you become a true Black owner *and* heir, then you will understand what I mean, and you will dispose of the vaults as they should be disposed of."

Harry took a step closer, eyes on Cushfoot's face. The goblin had gone back to his mask-like expression, though, and didn't seem inclined to change it.

"I think that there's something else behind this," Harry whispered. "Something that you're trying to disguise with all your talk of owners and heirs and the differences between them." He took a deep breath, eyes on Cushfoot, who didn't falter and didn't look away from him. "If I find out what it was, then I won't hesitate to do the *opposite*. The way I'm going to make Draco Malfoy and Narcissa *Black* my heirs, and you can't stop me."

"If you had submitted to the ordeal already, then you would understand what I was talking about better than you can now," Cushfoot intoned.

Harry sneered at him. "I've never simply submitted to anything in my life. You can ask Voldemort that."

Cushfoot didn't flinch at Voldemort's name, but he did lean forwards, suddenly enough that Harry was almost tricked into taking a step back. He clenched his hands at his sides and fought the impulse away a few seconds later, though. He wasn't going to be intimidated by someone who wanted things Harry couldn't even *understand* from him.

"The house will eat defiance as it will eat submission," Cushfoot said softly. "Submission would be a bit less painful for you personally, that is all."

"If you would speak up more plainly, then maybe I could content both of us." Harry didn't really want to fight the goblins. He wanted to be free of the house and convince Draco that they might have something together, not struggle against anyone else.

"The house is older than you know," Cushfoot whispered. "It has requirements that you cannot

understand, requirements that you will not pay attention to." He leaned in until his eyes seemed to have a golden spark, like candle-flames. "You will not listen to it the same way you will not listen to *us*, Mr. Potter, you and the rest of the wizards. You thought you were entitled to break into our bank and do whatever you liked. And you think you can break free of the house as if it is merely another tool to do your will."

For a long moment, Harry's legs refused to move, or his eyes. He stood there and stared, and it wasn't of his own free will.

Then Cushfoot gave a hoarse chuckle, and said, "You will learn better. I wish I could be there at the moment when you do, but alas, the ordeal of the heirs of the House of Black has always been private to the heirs." He waved his claws at the parchments Harry held. "You can try and make the Malfoys your heirs, or entities that are part of the negotiations, to use your terms. I do not think you will succeed."

Harry turned and stalked away without a word. He wasn't even sure what he would have said.

The house was intelligent, he knew that much, from the way it had talked today. But a lot of the rest of it, he'd thought came from the house's influence on him. It wasn't making decisions *for* him; it was just him making decisions that the house would approve of, because it was leaning on his mind.

But Cushfoot had talked like the house had its own will and might do something to prevent him from making the Malfoys his heirs. On the other hand, how much of that was just Cushfoot trying to frighten him because he liked it when Blacks depended on him alone and left him to manage their property?

Harry took a deep breath and tightened his hold on the parchments. There was no reason not to *try* what he had in mind. If it was impossible, he would find something else.

Because he'd meant what he said to Cushfoot. He *surrendered* to no one, not the house and not the goblins and not his own desires. If something wanted to fight him, it would have to conquer him, because he would not yield.

## Complicated Forms

“I don’t know what half this stuff *means*.”

Draco had to smile. Potter sounded so lost as he bent over the tangle of parchments on the table that Cushfoot had given them. That was to be expected, Draco thought. Potter had grown up outside the wizarding world, and from what Draco remembered of the first time they’d met in Diagon Alley, Hagrid was the one who had taken him to Gringotts the first time and got him his money and had his key. He would never have faced the legal precautions and language that the goblins used to safeguard vault owners’ interests.

“Like *this*.” Potter sat back and stabbed a finger down in the middle of the paper. “What does this *mean*?”

“Move your finger, and maybe I can see,” Draco murmured.

Potter flushed and snatched his hand back. “Sorry.” He looked at his finger as though it was part of the problem. “I never had to deal with something like this before.”

Draco only nodded again. He thought any words of sympathy he could speak would sound contrived, and he didn’t want to think hard enough to come up with non-contrived ones. He moved the paper towards him instead and skimmed over it.

“Here,” he said, moving his own finger to the beginning of the sentence. Potter followed his gestures like a dog, which Draco had to admit was pleasing. He liked the fire in Potter’s eyes sometimes, but he also liked being in control, being able to do some things that Potter couldn’t. “When it talks about claim by ‘primacy of blood.’ That applies because, most of the time, someone wouldn’t be able to take money from a vault or transfer it except to someone they’re related to. There have even been cases where wizards wanted to leave money to adopted children, but it went to their blood children instead, because they hadn’t signed the documents in the right way.”

Potter read the rest of the sentence through, his lips moving, and then scowled at the box at the end of the sentence. “So what answer do I want to give? Yes or no?”

Draco reread the sentence himself, then nodded. “You want to mark ‘yes.’ You’re going to transfer money to us because of primacy of blood.” He had owled his mother last night about the money that was coming to them. She hadn’t responded yet. Draco was a little afraid of what might happen when she did.

Potter, far from those concerns, was wrestling in silence—lip-moving silence—with the next sentence. But he growled at Draco when Draco tried to take the parchment away from him, so Draco leaned back with his hands behind his head. He’d let Potter handle this one himself.

Someone cleared their throat pointedly next to the table, and Draco looked up. The following second, he wished he hadn’t. Hermione Granger stood beside him, her hands on her hips and her eyes so narrow that Draco thought she would go blind.

“Is this a private party, or can anyone join you?” she asked, with a bit of nicely pointed sarcasm that Draco had to admire.

“Come on, Hermione,” Potter said, cocking his head to the side as if looking at the parchment upside-down would help. “Maybe you can help us translate some of the things that Gringotts is saying.”

“Gringotts?” Granger was sensible enough to take the seat next to Potter, instead of the one next to Draco, as Draco had feared for a second she would do. She picked up one of the forms that Potter had already filled out, and scanned it, frowning. “Why did you go back there? You *knew* they were going to be upset about us breaking out on a dragon.”

Draco closed his eyes for a second. The more he heard about Potter’s adventures during the war, the less he envied his friends.

“Yes, but there wasn’t anywhere else I could go.” Potter turned towards Granger. Draco studied his neck for a second. He wondered if it was his imagination that the scar that formed Potter’s 2 had started to waver back straight again, as if it might turn into a 1 with enough persuasion. “Draco suggested that giving some of the Black money to someone else might lessen the house’s hold on me.”

Granger blinked and chewed her lip. “Yes, that might work,” she said, as if it being Draco’s idea should immediately lessen the likelihood. Draco didn’t roll his eyes, but mostly because she hadn’t looked in his direction and the gesture would be wasted. “But what are all these forms, then?” She waved her hand at them.

“The house itself said I couldn’t transfer the money,” Harry said. “The goblin who’s in charge of the Black vaults—his name’s Cushfoot—signed this document that let the house speak, and it was going on and on about how it didn’t want any owner other than me. But I pointed out that I’m not living in the house, and I said I could make Draco and Mrs. Malfoy my heirs. Cushfoot didn’t seem convinced, but he gave me these forms to do it.” He stared at the parchments with a miserable expression that Draco was more used to seeing when he whinged about Potions. “But these are *hard*.”

“Of course they are,” Granger said. “Goblins don’t like giving up anything or not getting their own way.” She darted a look at Draco this time. Draco raised his eyebrows and turned his head to the side, wondering if he should be glad that he’d finally qualified for a little of her attention, or not. “Have you been helping him get through it?”

“Some of it,” Draco said. “Some of it he figured out for himself.”

That got him a *much* more scathing look from Granger, and she abruptly stood up and leaned over to take Draco’s arm. “Would you excuse us for a second, Harry?” she asked. “Malfoy and I have something to talk about.”

“Let go of him.”

Draco started and looked at Potter. *That* voice, on the other hand, was one he’d only started hearing after he knew that Potter was under the influence of the house. And he was sure that Potter, currently, had a hand on his wand under the table, aiming it at Granger. His eyes were flat but shimmering, and the scar on his throat was definitely back to being a 2.

“What is wrong with you, Harry?” Granger put her hands on her hips. “You should have refused to give up the money and the vaults to him, if the house is influencing you. What is he important

for?”

There was a moment during which Potter visibly struggled, and then he took his hand off his wand. “He’s fine,” he said. “You can talk to him. Just don’t *touch* him.” He gave them both a single, fiery glance, and then bowed his head to stare at the parchments again.

Granger gaped for a second, then tossed her head at Draco and made her way down an aisle of books. Draco hesitated, but Potter nodded at him, fringe falling into his eyes. Draco knew he wouldn’t get either words or one of those tempting fiery glances if he lingered, so he followed Granger.

She didn’t go far. Draco walked around the corner of the shelves and found her wand aimed straight at him, almost poking into the skin of his stomach.

“What did you *do* to him?”

Draco raised his hands slowly. Perhaps the last week had given him experience in dealing with dangerous enraged people, or perhaps the war and being around the Dark Lord had, because he found himself choosing his words without much difficulty. “I didn’t do anything, Granger. You ought to be able to see that. The house is the thing that’s influencing him. Maybe if he had been more cautious or done something *else* with his time, he would have realized before now that the house is dangerous.”

“What should he have done?” Granger put her hands on her hips again. At least that meant her wand went with them.

“Read more about the house when he realized he inherited it,” Draco replied. That seemed so obvious to him that he wondered why Potter *hadn’t* done it. Potter had never had a family, but being taken as Black’s heir gave him a sort of claim to one. Why hadn’t he tried to learn everything he could about the Blacks? “Read about the ordeals that houses tend to inflict on their heirs. There must be books out there that talk in more detail about it, ones that you and he haven’t found yet.”

Granger tossed her head a little again. “I still think you did something to him.” Her wand came up again.

“I told you, I didn’t—”

“*Hermione.*”

Draco whirled around. That was Potter, his wand out and his eyes gone so dark that Draco really thought they were black and not green, even given the fact that the light between the bookshelves was dim.

“I told you not to touch him,” Potter whispered, and then he was charging.

## The Charge

“Potter!”

Draco hadn't known he would bark like that until he saw Potter *moving* like that. He didn't have time to tell if it did any good. He sprang between Potter and Granger, his arms out, not caring whether he felt the jab of a wand into his back. Granger might have some idiotic ideas that she could handle Potter by herself. Draco knew she couldn't. No one could who didn't know how dangerous he was right now.

Then Potter was right up in front of him, his teeth bared and his wand pressed against Draco's throat, and Draco realized that he might not have known how dangerous Potter was, either. Potter pressed, and pressed, until Draco was leaning back with his head dangling down onto a shelf. Draco tried to swallow, but the odd angle and the place that Potter's wand had come to rest made it impossible.

“Did she touch you?” Potter whispered to him, close and soft as a lover. He moved in until Draco could hardly breathe or see him. “Did you *let* her touch you?”

“No,” Draco said, and he knew his life might depend on the scorn he could infuse into his voice. He did it now. “Why would I let a Mudblood like her touch me, when I have you?” He moved one of his hanging arms up, so he could run his hand in a quick caress down Potter's shoulder.

Potter took a step back and stared at him. His eyes were as clear as acid, and he darted a quick glance in Granger's direction. Draco didn't dare turn his head to see what her face looked like right now. He didn't dare move, either.

“I don't like that word,” Potter whispered, but slowly, as if he didn't know where the dislike had come from.

“Of course you don't,” Granger said, her voice fretful. Draco saw the stormclouds blowing in across Potter's face again, and ground his teeth. “You hate it because he called me that, and called your mum that. *Harry*. What did he do to you—”

“Shut up, Granger,” Draco said, and Potter turned back to look at him, panting, a few inches from hysterical.

“You know it's true,” Draco said, and he had never been so calm, never played so calm, even when he knew that his life depended on the way that he got the Dark Lord to react. “I would never touch someone like her. I wouldn't even have looked twice at you before you inherited the Black house.”

“But what about now?” Potter edged towards him, his wand swinging beside him. “You're holding still, just like I told you to. You told me the truth. You never answered that question I asked you in Gringotts.”

*What question?* But Draco remembered a moment later, when Potter's hand rose and hovered in front of him. Whether Potter could touch him.

Draco sniffed and glanced aside without moving his neck. “I don't much like people who bend my



body at unnatural angles and think that I'm looking to touch people I despise all the time."

Potter hesitated one more time, but then released Draco from both his wand and the fear, stepping back and gesturing at him. Draco stood up, and straightened his robes with little tugs that he hoped looked the way they were supposed to, like proud movements and not nervous ones. He was not going to give in to fear and let it make him act like an idiot.

"What about now?" Potter edged a step closer to him. He seemed to have forgotten about Granger, who was watching him with an open mouth. Potter's voice had gone soft and yearning, in fact, and he held out his hand as though he assumed that Draco had forgotten what it looked like without a wand in it.

Draco examined the lines of Potter's palm as though making sure it was good enough for a pure-blood like him, and then gave a sort of magnanimous sigh and shrug. "I grant permission for you to touch me."

Potter's hand brushed his cheek a moment later. His face was so soft, so full of an almost heartbreaking happiness, that Draco bit his lip to avoid saying several unfortunate things. Didn't Potter *think* about what it meant, that he practically wanted to caress Draco where he never had before?

And didn't he think about his friends, and what Granger would think, witnessing this? But then, one predominant feature of the Black heirs was that they seemed unable to focus on more than one thought at a time.

"Harry! What are you *doing*?"

*Until someone breaks in and interrupts their focus, of course,* Draco mused, seeing the way that Potter flinched and wheeled to face Granger. She had finally had enough, and stood right beside them, her face red. Somehow Draco doubted it was entirely the result of watching that last little tender bout he and Potter had just enjoyed.

"Touching Draco." Potter said it as though he couldn't fathom why Granger didn't understand, his eyes wide and blinking.

"But *why*?" Granger edged forwards, hands still on her hips. Perhaps he could come up with a charm that glued them there, Draco thought, and she would walk in front of a mirror that way and see how silly it looked. "You never wanted to touch him before. Is this all a result of that house and its madness?"

"I was a little blind before this summer," Potter said coolly. "For example, I was stupid enough to assume that staying in Grimmauld Place by myself was a good idea. Draco was one of the reasons I became aware that it wasn't." He smiled warmly at Draco, who just shook his head to try and shed some of the responsibility. But Potter had already turned around again to frown at Granger. "There's nothing wrong with wanting someone, with wanting to forgive someone."

Granger might have swallowed pure lemon juice. It was a few seconds before she could find her voice.

"But this isn't right, Harry," she said, pitching her voice as though she assumed that she could reach Potter if she just didn't yell. "You know—you know your sudden desire to be close to Malfoy is unnatural."

“Oh, *dear*,” Draco said involuntarily, although no one had asked him.

Potter seemed to freeze for a second, a wave of invisible marble pouring down his face and stiffening his cheeks. Then he turned to face Granger, and folded his arms. He looked more like the heir of Black than Draco had ever seen him, but not because of the color of his hair and eyes. It was the expression, the posture, the way Draco had seen that gliding grace in him the first day on the Hogwarts Express, and wondered why no one else *noticed*.

Granger did notice now, he saw, from the way her mouth was open. She just had no idea what to do about it.

“Unnatural?” Potter whispered. There was a sibilance to his words that reminded Draco that Potter was a Parselmouth, where nothing much had for a while. “Maybe unusual. Maybe not something that would have happened without the influence of the house. But I assure you, nothing is more *natural* than for me to desire Draco. Perhaps you would know that, if you knew anything about the history of the Blacks.”

Granger had been placed in Gryffindor for a reason, Draco saw. She edged closer instead of running away.

“You’re not a Black,” she said, her words soft enough that Draco heard the heartbeat expanding through his body over them. “You were born a Potter. You’re Harry, our friend. Don’t you want to come back to that? To the world you knew, the happiness that you could have if you break free of the house?” Her eyes flickered to Malfoy, and she gulped once. “I thought Malfoy was here to help you with that.”

Potter frowned and touched his forehead as though it had begun to hurt. Draco swallowed panic when the heel of Potter’s palm brushed his lightning bolt scar, and then told himself not to be stupid. Potter’s problems right now had nothing to do with the Dark Lord.

“That’s right,” Granger whispered. “I know that you can come back to us, be our Harry again.”

Draco had the feeling she would have gone on—she never did know when to shut up—but Potter turned suddenly to face Draco, his mouth wide open. Draco stared at him, heart and head thundering as he waited for something to happen.

“Would I still want you if I was free?” Potter asked. Before Draco could even think about why he should answer that question, let alone with what, Potter rushed on. “Do you want me?”

Draco waited too long, or he didn’t find an answer for too long.

Potter made a sound like a sob and rushed past Draco, towards the table they’d been sitting at. Granger took a step after him, and Draco rushed out in turn. If Potter did something to the Gringotts documents on the library table, Draco doubted they could get more.

But Potter had gone past them entirely, and pounded out of the library, head lowered like a rushing bull, eyes desolate.

And by the time Draco got into the corridor, he was gone.

## Hidden in the Dark

Harry came out of his trance with a start. He had fallen into running, the way he sometimes used to when he was escaping from Dudley and his friends, and now Hogwarts had blurred around him. Harry lifted his head, panting, and turned it back and forth.

There was...

There was a dungeon corridor around him, he interpreted slowly, his mind stumbling as he fought his way back towards a semblance of normality. A corridor that hadn't been used in a long time, by the chill coming from the stones and the lines of grime and dust on the doors around him. Perhaps this had once been a classroom, or even bedrooms, in the days when Slytherin House had been bigger.

Contradictory emotions wrenched at him, and Harry put his hand over his heart, which felt as if it was trying to slow down and speed up at the same time. For a moment, he wanted to mourn for the lost glory of Slytherin, where so many of his ancestors had been.

And for the same moment, he wanted to sneer and laugh, and say that someday they would fade and die out completely, like a good Gryffindor would.

Like *Harry* would.

Harry closed his eyes. Hermione's words still rang in his head, telling him that he could come back and be her Harry again, Ron's Harry, if he tried.

But his own words were still stronger, the ones that had come from his own mouth when he asked Draco wistfully if Draco wanted him.

Harry swallowed. He had run away like a fool, but still, he couldn't go back yet. He pressed forwards, casting a few spells that would cut the webs in front of him, and ignoring the temptation to step on the spiders that swarmed on the floor. That was something a Black would do. Well, either that or keep spiders as pets. As long as Harry didn't do either, then he could pretend he had a piece of himself that was separate from the house.

"Potter."

The voice echoed, from several directions. Harry jerked back and stared wildly around himself. Then he swallowed and stood up. If someone had come from Slytherin to find him, his worst defense was looking weak—not a defense at all, in fact. They either hated him, or might hate him. He drew his wand.

"That will be of no good unless you know the spells to unpaint me."

Harry cast *Lumos*, and the light speared through the gloom of the corridor as though someone had set the cobwebs on fire. *Not a bad idea*, muttered the part of him that Harry was trying to ignore.

On the wall, next to a doorway that had some shattered splinters of wood sticking out of the sides, but no door, hung a dark frame of what looked like wrought gold. In the center of it, against a

background of shelves, stood Professor Snape, his arms folded.

Harry just stared at him for what felt like the longest time. He tried to remember if anyone had told him Snape had a portrait among the Headmasters, and couldn't remember. He'd had other things to think about that summer.

But really, even if Snape *did* have a portrait in the Headmistress's office, it wouldn't explain why he had one here, in a corridor where no one ever went.

"Why did they hang a portrait of you here?" he asked. He had already taken a close look at the background behind Snape, the shelves that held endless rows of books, but he couldn't see any space for another figure there. That made it more likely that it was Snape's picture, instead of one that he had forced someone else out of.

Snape's eyebrows went up. "Something has changed you for the better, Potter, if the first thing you ask is a sensible question," he murmured.

Harry couldn't help scowling, remembering the last thing that had changed him—Kreacher probably thought it was for the better, too. He rubbed the silver scars the Kneazle had left on him, and said nothing.

Snape caught the gesture, and made a small humming sound, the kind that Harry remembered him making when he looked at Malfoy's potions. Harry started to turn around. He had no desire to be an interesting potion to Snape, or anything else to Snape, ever again.

But Snape murmured, "It seems that the consequences of Black choosing you as his heir are catching up with you at last." He sounded pleased about it.

Harry paused, and then pivoted back slowly. He stared at Snape. Not even Malfoy had recognized the signs of what the house was doing to him that quickly. Or, rather, Harry didn't *think* he had.

*It's not like I'll get the chance to ask him, since I don't think he'll ever come near me again if he can help it.*

Harry bit his lips savagely to hold back any quiver of betraying emotion, and shook his head. "I know that Sirius never became the heir fully, because he fled before he came of age," he said emotionlessly. "How would *you* know anything about it?"

Snape laughed, and his voice was freer than Harry had ever heard it, if no kinder. "Because the elder Blacks were supporters of the Dark Lord's cause, Potter. I met them several times, after Black's brother became a Death Eater. They did not bear silver scars in the same place as you, but they bore similar ones."

Harry shook his head, amazed. He never would have thought to ask Snape for the kind of information he needed. "Fine," he said. "Then do you know how Sirius and Regulus got out of it?"

"By never letting it happen to them in the first place."

Harry's hope burned to ash. "Right," he said. "Fat lot of good you are." He turned away.

"Perhaps," Snape said, in a voice that suggested it made him rejoice not to be of use to Harry. "However."

Harry made himself stop and turn around, although he knew that it was probably one of Snape's sadistic jokes and he should just ignore him. "What?" he asked.

Snape tapped his finger against his lips, gazing at Harry all the while, and making Harry think he would never get around to the point. However, finally he nodded and said, "There is a potion that may be able to change your body back to what it was before you began to accept the burden of the house. I would not advise it most of the time, because it is highly poisonous. However, I think that you might as well try it. If you yield and slip under the influence of the Black house, that will be worse than dying of poison."

Harry laughed, but cut himself off when he heard how high and shrill the laughter had begun, and saw the way Snape was staring at him. Even more than he didn't want to be like the old Blacks, Harry didn't want to be like Voldemort. "Right," he said. "I've already tortured a house-elf and partially tortured Draco. I don't want to do any worse."

Snape's eyes narrowed as though Harry had given the wrong answer on an exam. "Why would you torture Draco? I was left under the impression that you had rescued him, misguided as such an action might seem to your friends."

Harry shook his head. "I thought he might have some information about the Blacks, and I pinned him to a wall and sliced into his mind."

It occurred to him, suddenly, that Draco actually *had* given him some information about the Blacks; it just wasn't verbal information. Harry's hand went to the book under his shirt, the one that Narcissa Malfoy had sent him.

But before he could pull it out and get lost in its pages, Snape's voice woke him again. "You are not a Legilimens."

Harry stared at him and shrugged. "Well, either it was just a matter of will holding me back before, or the house is giving me the power because it's partially a Dark Art. And I did push you back into your mind and see your memories once, don't forget."

Snape's sneer said that he was unlikely to forget. "Do you want my help to brew this potion or not, Potter?"

Harry planted his hand over his heart. "Oh, but Professor Snape, I would hate to disturb your eternal rest by begging you to help me," he chirped. "Just tell me the name of the potion, and I'll look it up myself."

Snape's smile altered towards the feral. "Do you suppose I wish to see the school destroyed, boy?" he breathed. "No. I will tell you certain things, but you will brew the potion under my eye."

Harry had to snort. "Even you don't believe that I'm as bad as Neville was," he said. "What's your *real* reason for helping me?"

"So that you will live long enough for Draco to take his vengeance," Snape said, staring intently into his eyes.

Harry considered that reason, and found it at least acceptable, if not good. He nodded. "So where do you want me to start?"

*And if Snape helps me, breathed the back of his mind, then Draco won't have to, and I can let him go.*

## Where He Went

“I don’t know where he went, Granger, for the last time. Don’t you think I would tell you if I knew, just to get *you* off my back?”

That set Granger off in another flurry of scolding that Draco paid less than no attention to. He was gazing wearily down the corridor from the library instead. He’d returned there after a fruitless search for Potter that had carried him up to the Astronomy Tower—Draco couldn’t help thinking that the Dark magic of the Black inheritance might push Potter to jump—and down to the Slytherin common room without revealing anything. At the very least, he had to gather up their Gringotts documents before someone else noticed them.

Granger had already taken care of that. And Granger had determined that, for some reason, he was the best person to find Potter.

Granger had opened her mouth to begin a new volley of words when Potter stalked into the library. Draco stared at him, but he didn’t seem to notice. He did look up and incline his head in a choppy nod to Granger, and then faced the forms again.

“Where were we?” he asked, plopping into his chair.

Granger swarmed to his side and said, “*Harry!* We were worried sick!” She continued before Draco could challenge those words as applied to himself. “Don’t just come in here and act like nothing happened, we *know* it did!”

“I know that something happened.” Potter’s voice was without inflection, and the way he tilted his head back to look at Granger made Draco grip his chair, then wonder why. The gesture was certainly a lot less threatening than the *last* way Potter had looked at his friend, and even than the ways he usually considered Draco. “I acted unforgivably towards you. I hope you can forgive me, even though I don’t deserve it.”

Granger gaped for a second, and then nodded. “Of course, Harry,” she whispered, her voice lowering with emotion. “I know it was that awful house, and not you.”

Draco tried to catch Potter’s eye, but he had his head bowed, searching through the forms. “Thanks, Hermione. I think that we need to sign one more, Malfoy, and then you can go,” he added, looking up at Draco.

Draco would have fallen back a step if it wouldn’t have so obviously exposed to Granger that something was going on. There was fire in Potter’s eyes, but it was the fire that Draco had seen when they were playing Quidditch against each other, not the savage light the house tended to put there.

He was back to seeing Draco as an opponent, not someone he wanted to persuade into his bed.

*What happened?* Draco wanted to be relieved, but he didn’t quite dare. When Potter was mysteriously influenced by something Draco didn’t see, it always turned out to be bad news for him. And Draco didn’t think this climb back to his former self was natural at all.

“Why don’t I stay?” He kept his voice casual, but he nodded to Granger. “I am rather intimately involved in this, after all.”

Granger sniffed and touched Potter’s arm. She didn’t seem to notice the way he stiffened, before he flicked his eyes closed and took a steadying breath. “I’m sure your interference isn’t necessary, Malfoy. Harry and I can handle this on our own, now, with Ron’s help. Besides,” she added, a thick tone in her voice, “if you don’t know what you feel and Harry can’t control himself around you, then you *ought* to stay away.”

Potter bowed his head further, and nodded as though he agreed. Draco was more than sure he didn’t, and wanted to say something, but Potter grunted and shoved the form that he needed to sign over to him.

Draco wondered what he was supposed to do now. Refuse to sign it, and cheat himself and his mother out of a lot of money?

No. He had to think of himself and his family before anything else. He might have to insist on being allowed back into Potter’s life, he might have to ask questions he would rather not ask, but there was no reason to deprive them of part of their inheritance on top of that. He signed with a flourish and leaned back in his chair, waiting to see what would happen next.

Granger glared at him, was what happened next, and repeated, “You can go now, Malfoy.”

Draco hesitated one more time and turned to Potter. Silly as it was, he would have stayed if Potter had told him to.

But Potter’s head continued bowed, his fingers playing with the quill that Draco had used to sign the last form. Draco stood up and pushed his chair back with a long, raspy squeak, and still Potter gave no sign that he’d heard.

Draco checked the words he wanted to utter, bowed instead, and left the library. He heard Granger ask Potter something in which his name figured prominently.

Draco didn’t listen. If it wasn’t any of his business, then it wasn’t any of his business, no matter how much he wanted to know what had caused Potter to change like that.

He wandered back to the Slytherin common room, wondering what he would do with his sudden freedom.

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Harry could still feel the desire hammering against the walls of his chest as he watched Draco go, with his head lowered so that no one could watch him watching. He *wanted* to reach out and touch him. He *wanted* to lean his hand against Draco’s heart and explain. He wanted his help with the potion that Snape had agreed to teach him, and his help with the research that Harry would need to do before he let Snape begin teaching him to brew.

The problem was, yielding to those impulses would pull Draco straight back into the clutches of what he now had the chance to escape from: Harry’s insanity and his perhaps hopeless quest to be free of the house. If Harry could give him the chance, now, while he still had his feelings under control, to leave, then he might manage even more in the future.



“Harry?” Hermione tapped him on the shoulder. “You said something about how you had found a solution to the house and your problem with it?”

Turning to her, Harry forced himself to remember all the benefits he would get if he *did* manage to change back, and focus on being himself: he would get his friends’ love and trust, for one thing. He smiled at her and nodded. “If we can’t solve the problem with ordinary magic or by researching pure-blood families, what about potions?”

Hermione clapped her hands together, her eyes sparking. “Of course! Potions can be pretty complex, and they can include symbolic ingredients in them that can influence the outcome! I bet we can find one that would let us free you from the house, or at least sacrifice some symbolic ingredients so that we can modify another potion’s formula into one that would free you...”

Harry let her chatter on, while he stood up and went to fetch some books on potions from the section in the library where Snape had told him to look. He would have to “guide” Hermione in the right direction, not revealing that he already knew things about the potion. She would probably distrust Snape, or at least raise objections to his motive for teaching Harry how to brew the thing.

Harry paused in reaching out for one of the books on the shelf in front of him. Come to that, maybe *he* should distrust Snape. The man had never answered his question about why he had a portrait in such an out-of-the-way place in the dungeons.

On the other hand, who cared? The influence of the house couldn’t have anything to do with the portrait, and Snape couldn’t have known Harry would run in that direction when he left the library. He probably would have seen Harry eventually from some other frame, but it was just too much of an outlandish theory, the kind that Hermione would tell him he needed more evidence for, to think that Snape could have *made* him come there.

“Harry? Have you found the right books?”

Harry started and picked up some of the tomes, turning around. Hermione was waiting for him, hopeful smile and reaching arms and all.

*No matter what happens to me, I just have to be grateful that Draco is well out of it, and that I have friends who can help me. I never should have approached Draco in the first place, especially once I realized that he didn’t know anything about the house. What I did was wrong, and I need to let him go and move on.* Harry snorted a little as he felt his own reluctance dragging at his limbs like treacle. *No matter how hard it is.*

## Leading the Dance

“You were able to fool Granger?”

“Would I be here if I hadn’t?” Harry retorted, dumping the books that he’d taken from the library onto a table he had Transfigured from one of the broken desks in the nearby classroom. “She would have come with me and insisted on boring you by telling you that she always knew you were a hero.”

Snape shuddered, then peered at Harry as though he wanted to get revenge on him for making him do that. “You have grown a sense of humor since the war,” he said.

“I’ve always had it, I just couldn’t show it to you without getting detention,” Harry said flatly. He thought maybe the darkness of his humor had changed since the house started influencing him, but not the humor itself. He’d always had thoughts about the people around him that he didn’t share with others. First the Dursleys, and then the wizarding public and Snape and Malfoy, now his friends.

His breath started to come short when he thought of Draco. Harry shook his head in irritation and forced it back under control. It didn’t *matter* whether he wanted Draco here with him or not. He couldn’t have him, and that was that.

“Perhaps that is true,” Snape said, and went on peering at him. Harry loudly cleared his throat and pointed down at the potions books.

“You said you were going to show me how to brew the Clear Heart Potion?” Harry thought it was a stupid name for a potion, but he still knew better than to show his sense of humor in front of Snape by making fun of something Snape cared about.

Snape nodded and leaned back against the bookshelf in his painting. “You know that you had to gather gillyweed and a piece of pure crystal.”

“Already done,” Harry said coolly, and laid them down on the table next to the books.

This time, Snape’s eyebrows rose to the top of his forehead and stayed there. “You have ordered them from Diagon Alley and had them arrive already?” Before Harry could reply, he flipped his hand and sneered. “Of course, anyone there would do anything for the Chosen One, including depriving *legitimate* customers of their products.”

Harry stayed quiet. Actually, he’d got the ingredients by raiding Slughorn’s supply cupboard, but if Snape wasn’t going to ask that, Harry didn’t see why he needed to bring it up.

“Well.” Snape paced from side to side as if considering the books, then said, “You will also need a cauldron of pure pewter, in which *nothing* has been brewed before.”

Harry unshrunk the cauldron from its position in his pocket, and shifted over to the side so that it could sit comfortably on the table.

Snape looked hard at him, but Harry looked back blandly, determined not to give anything away.

He knew that Snape's help came with conditions. Staying silent was one of them. If Harry offended Snape, he didn't think he'd get a second chance.

"Very well," Snape said. "You need to dice the gillyweed into pieces not longer than a sixteenth of an inch."

Harry took his potions knife out of his satchel and began to dice the gillyweed without speaking. Snape watched him, apparently waiting for the moment when his stare could make Harry look up in sheer self-defense. The moment never came, and Harry went on working. Only when Snape cleared his throat did Harry look up at him and nod a little.

"You should measure them," Snape said.

Harry wordlessly cast a spell that would make a measure hover next to him, in the form of a little metal stick notched at sixteenths of an inch. It was such a useful spell that Harry had already used it several times in Potions this term, although he had to admit this was the first time that he had performed it nonverbally.

Snape stared again. Harry didn't look up, because then he would say something and the chance would go away. He worked, instead, hands so steady that after a while he became lost in the rhythm of the work for its own sake, and started when Snape spoke again. He bet the bastard was smiling at that, although he didn't look up to check.

"Now gather up the pieces and place them in the cauldron. Gently. If you get the oil of your hands on them, it will ruin their effectiveness."

Harry rolled his eyes and used his wand to levitate them into the cauldron instead, which seemed to be a more practical solution to him. Snape grunted once, as if impressed despite himself that Harry had figured that out—or maybe he was upset that Harry hadn't ruined the gillyweed and had to start all over again.

After Harry added water, the potion in the cauldron began to swirl, slowly, like the flushing of a toilet. Harry kept his eyes on it, and didn't need Snape's sharp words when the clarity turned to deep blue that he needed to move. He picked up the piece of crystal, a rough hunk—Snape had said that what it was shaped like wasn't important, only its clarity—and dropped it into the potion.

The potion swallowed it; Harry didn't know if it dissolved or not, and supposed he would have to be a Potions master himself to know. He just watched, and large bubbles came to the surface of the potion, popping and swelling open. There was a faint, foul smell, and the liquid became absolutely transparent.

"Good," Snape breathed. "Now, you must drink it."

Harry's shoulders tightened for a long moment. That wasn't what the books he'd retrieved from the library had said. They said the Clear Heart potion needed to sit for at least several minutes before it was consumed, and preferably for an hour. You couldn't wait too long, but you also had to wait for any particular particles or grit in it to dissolve.

Harry licked his lips and looked up at the portrait. Snape was leaning forwards against the frame, peering down at the cauldron. Then he looked up at Harry, and his eyes glittered.

"Do you want to be free of the house or not?" Snape whispered. "I remember how persistent it was,

from what Black told me—Regulus, not the other one. His parents couldn't escape its taint once it was on them. Not that they wanted to, so they didn't try very hard. But *you*, Potter. I thought you would do anything to be free, or at least to spare Draco the suffering of being touched by someone who has the taint."

Harry licked his lips again and picked up the vial he had brought along, which he'd thought would contain the potion for long enough to let him take it to the Gryffindor common room, or wherever else he could go on such short notice. Now he used it to scoop some of the potion out of the cauldron, and stared at it.

Snape had tried to protect him. He'd died in the pursuit of the war, and then got the memories to Harry to ensure that he would defeat Voldemort on time. Why would he lie now?

Harry's gaze darted to another book he'd taken out of the library and carried down here with the potions ones as soon as he could get away from Hermione. The book was sprawled beneath the others that he'd taken, and he didn't think Snape had seen it. *Portraits and Their Ways*.

Harry hadn't had time to look at it much, but the first line said, *Portraits are not the people they were made in memory of*.

Just because the real Snape had protected and fought for Harry, it didn't mean that the Snape in the painting would. And maybe he considered that any debt he owed for betraying Harry's parents had ended the moment he died.

"Drink it!" Snape hissed, his voice as low as the crackling of flames. "Or do you want your best chance to pass and perish?"

It was probably okay, Harry judged. The few minutes that the books had talked about passing before you drank it had passed while Harry hesitated and Snape pressured him. He tilted the vial back and let the potion, thick and slow as quicksilver, seep down the side of the glass and into his mouth.

The first sip was like biting into a mass of icicles. Harry staggered and clutched at his chest. The feeling went home to his heart; he thought he could *feel* it slow and stop.

Snape laughed.

Harry opened his eyes, or tried. All he could see in front of him was a blurring, wavery clarity, and all he could feel, besides the coldness in his chest, was the harsh pain on his throat, as though his scars had opened again.

He slumped to the floor, flailing hand reaching for the cauldron and the books and finding nothing, nothing, but cold stone beneath him and cold laughter above him.

## A Crystal Drowning

Draco paused and looked around. He was standing in front of the door to the Slytherin common room, and someone had made a soft sound nearby. Draco knew that there were some people in the school who would like nothing more than to ambush him. He put his hand on his wand.

The sound repeated itself, a gagging, choking noise. Draco narrowed his eyes. Had a plan to trap him, or some other Slytherin, gone wrong? That would be something worth seeing, if a Gryffindor was caught in their own trap.

Of course, it might be Hufflepuffs or Ravenclaws instead of Gryffindors. They had seen the way the wind was blowing after the war, and had allied themselves with the Gryffindors as if they'd been there, that way, all along. But Draco thought it was still likely to be the House that had the worst rivalry with his.

He edged towards the choking noises, down a corridor that had a lot of recently-broken and singed spiderwebs hanging around. He snorted. It was like a Gryffindor to leave that many obvious traces of what he was trying to do, even when he thought he was being sneaky and subtle.

The corridor bent around a corner, and flooded suddenly with light. Draco blinked. He saw a table beneath an empty portrait frame, a cauldron on it, and an empty vial of dripping, clear potion beside it.

And on the floor, Potter, choking.

Draco would have banged his head into a wall if there was time. Of course walking away from Potter didn't mean he was really free. Of course he was always going to be dragged straight back into the mess, because that was the way Potter worked in the world.

Now, though, he didn't have time. He sprang over Potter to look at the potion, and swore under his breath. He couldn't tell exactly what it was, but he thought he knew the main component. Only undissolved crystal gave a potion that glinting edge. Anyone who knew anything about potions would wait until the little gritty pieces had faded.

Potter didn't know, though. Draco turned around and knelt next to him, trying to ignore the way his face was turning grey and his eyes rolling. The spell he needed to cast wasn't difficult, but it had to be precise. Worry distracting him—and worry over *why* he was worried—wouldn't help.

He swirled his wand above Potter's chest, creating a spiral. His mind was focused on the memory of Professor Snape's hands when he had taught Draco to counteract this kind of poison. Because it wasn't a property of the potion itself, but came from something going wrong with the brewing process, you could cure it with a spell and not an antidote. Draco hissed the words that leaked around his teeth like steam, a little impressed that he remembered them.

The spell formed a blue, smoky hook that promptly stabbed Potter in the nostrils. He let his head roll back, and he choked again, his tongue dangling out of his mouth. Draco tensed. If something went wrong, there were plenty of people who would be eager to blame him for Potter's death.

His own name was first on the list, honestly.

But Potter sagged back against the floor, and when he choked this time, it brought up a flood of pink-tinged crystalline liquid. Draco wrinkled his nose and moved out of the way, then hesitated when he raised his wand to cast a Cleaning Charm. Maybe someone would need that liquid for evidence of what potion Potter had actually swallowed, assuming he didn't regain consciousness soon and tell them.

And why had he been able to cast that antidote spell? Granted, maybe it wasn't bound to a specific year at Hogwarts and so it counted as a fourth-year spell or lower under the restrictions on his wand, but Draco still thought it was more complicated than the Ministry's restrictions should have allowed him.

Potter gasped, and opened his eyes. Draco shook his head. He would worry about it later. He bent over Potter. "What potion did you drink?" he asked. He wondered who had made it, and convinced Potter to swallow it, but the name of the potion was more important.

"The Clear Heart Potion," Potter whispered. "He—he said that I had to drink it quickly, and that it would free me from the influence of the Black house."

Draco frowned. As far as he knew, the Clear Heart Potion shouldn't have an effect like this, but it was also impossible for it to have the effect that Potter was claiming. It was meant to soothe grief and guilt over something that couldn't be changed. If anything, Potter was likely to slip back under the house's hold as his conscience quieted. "Who said that?"

"Snape," Potter said, and when Draco wondered if he had gone mad and was imagining dead people, Potter added, "In the portrait."

Draco glanced back, narrow-eyed, at the portrait. It was empty, but he had to admit, the books on the shelves in the background, and the general dark color, looked like the kind that Professor Snape would have chosen.

What was less clear was why he would have wanted to kill Potter.

"You drank it too soon," he told Potter briskly. "There were still undissolved bits of crystal in it. They began to poison you. You need to wait for longer than that."

"Good to know," Potter said faintly, and shut his eyes again. Draco sighed and cast the spell that would wake him up. Potter yelped and opened his eyes. Draco nodded to him.

"You need to remain awake until we can get to the hospital wing," he said. "You need to tell Madam Pomfrey what happened to you, and you need to tell her it wasn't me." That was important. The last thing he was going to do was be caught up in the stupidity of being blamed for Potter's condition just when he'd got free from being caught up in Potter's madness.

"No one who knows you would ever think you could do something like that," Potter muttered faintly. "You're not a killer."

Draco scowled horribly and wondered if there was a way to kill people with fourth-year spells that wasn't immediately traceable. He shook the thought off, though, and hauled Potter to his feet with a twist of his hand. "Come on, then. We're going to the hospital wing."

He did turn around and cast a Stasis Charm on the vial and the cauldron, then *Nox* to darken the torches Potter had lit here and a Shield Charm over the corridor. It wasn't a great disguise, but it

should serve to keep the area undisturbed until Potter or Draco could come back and collect the evidence. Not many people ever went down here.

*Which makes me wonder who hung the portrait on the wall.*

But Draco shook that thought off and moved on his way, Potter draped over his shoulder and flopping until Draco shifted him so his head wouldn't move so freely. "Come on," he muttered. "I think I made you choke up the potion, but Madam Pomfrey needs to look at you and make sure it's not still affecting you."

Potter didn't respond. Draco rolled his eyes. He really did have to do everything around here.

\*

*He saved me.*

Madam Pomfrey had immediately tucked Harry into bed and made distressed noises over him, then turned to Draco and made him go back to fetch the potion Harry had brewed. She had been a little inclined to blame Draco at first, but Harry had done a combination of glaring and logic—why would Draco bring him to the hospital wing if he was the one who'd hurt Harry?—that finally made her break down and admit Draco had been very helpful.

And more than helpful.

It was true that Draco had probably just paid back one of the life-debts he owed Harry, rather than done anything separate and new, but Harry found that his brain couldn't let go of the idea. And it was *his* brain, not the dark presence that lived in him since the Kneazle had marked him. He found that he could bear the inevitable visit from Ron and Hermione without a lot of wincing, but his mind was still with Draco.

Instead of just walking away—and no one could have proven that he had anything to do with it or blamed him—he had saved Harry's life.

Harry closed his eyes. *After I foolishly put it in danger. I'm an idiot. I was an idiot to trust Snape's portrait, anyway.*

The image of Draco was in his mind, though, shining more crystalline than the potion. Harry found that he couldn't forget it so easily. He didn't want to. He didn't want to taint Draco or crush him, either. If he'd been in the room, Harry thought, he would have watched him, but he might not have dared to touch him.

He was well out of this. Harry would tell him so, the next time he saw him.

He wanted Draco, but he wanted him free even more.

*He saved me. He didn't have to. He's a much better person than he thinks he is.*

*Or than I deserve.*

## Confrontations With Friends

“I want to know what’s been happening, mate.”

Harry wrapped his arms around his knees and sighed a little. Ron had come into the hospital wing that morning, and talked to Harry about Snape’s portrait and the poisoning he’d suffered from the potion. And then he had sat down and looked at Harry and said he knew a little about the house and Harry’s interactions with Malfoy, and that he wanted to know more.

He kept saying that he wanted to know every five minutes or so, while Harry sat there and agonized over how to tell him. Finally Harry decided that he could ask Ron to tell *him* something, and they could begin there.

“Do the scars on my neck look like a number to you?” he asked, lifting his head and turning it so that Ron could see beneath his chin. He could have conjured a mirror to look at them himself, but probably not without Madam Pomfrey noticing, and Harry was a little afraid of what would happen if any of the professors learned about his problem.

Ron leaned forwards and squinted. Then he sat back, shaking his head. “Not really,” he said. “There’s a loop like the top of a three, but the bottom is curved like the base of a two.”

Harry half-closed his eyes. “The scars have looked like numbers, and they’re changing,” he said. “They went up to three at one point, when I attacked Draco. Maybe they’re in-between now, and that means that I’m sliding back down and out of the house’s influence.”

“Maybe you should tell me everything from the beginning?” Ron’s voice was a little sharp.

Harry nodded and opened his eyes, and began to tell Ron about Draco following him that night he left the Great Hall and Harry using Legilimency on him. Ron listened without much more than a tightening of his mouth, but the line got tighter and tighter as Harry talked about forcing Draco to help him, and taking him to Grimmauld Place and Gringotts. Harry still couldn’t bring himself to talk about Kreacher. Ron was sure to mention it to Hermione, and she would want to know why Harry hadn’t told her right away.

It was...still something Harry wanted to think about, and not listen to the scoldings of his friends about. Or, worse, he would probably have to see tears in Hermione’s eyes, and he didn’t know how he could deal with that.

“So you forced Malfoy to help you,” Ron ended by summing up. “And now he’s saved your life.” He sounded wary, baffled, as if he thought Harry had left something about Draco out of the story. “Why would he do that, if he didn’t want to help you?”

Harry shrugged. “Maybe he thought about the money that he’s going to get from me, and he knew that he probably wouldn’t get it if I died under suspicious circumstances. Or maybe he was thinking that he would inherit the house if I died, and he doesn’t want to. Look at what it’s doing to *me*.”

Secretly, Harry didn’t think it was any of those things. He thought Draco had simply wanted to help him, and this was his way of doing so.



“Or he could have saved you to do something with you later.” Ron stared at him. “To get his revenge on you when you weren’t helpless and dying and you could appreciate what he was doing to you.”

Harry clenched some of the sheets in his hand and discovered that his ears had heated up, the way Ron’s did when he was embarrassed. “You don’t have any idea what you’re saying,” he breathed. “Please, Ron, shut up. It’s not like that. It’s *not*.”

“Maybe it’s not, but you have to admit that it’s at least likely.” Ron folded his hands and stared at Harry again.

“I don’t want to hear you say something like that about Draco again.” Harry almost didn’t recognize his voice. It had that same polite, empty tone that he had used when speaking to Hermione about potions, after Snape told him there was a potion that could reverse the house’s influence over him. And it was the voice he might have used when he attacked her, if he’d spent much time talking to Hermione instead of Draco.

“Mate, you have to consider the possibility that he had something to do with it. He was Snape’s favorite student, and he knew all about that potion—”

“You need to speak to her if you want to know what I do when he’s threatened,” Harry interrupted him. His voice was low and savage, and Ron stared at him, but at least he seemed to be listening this time. “Or when I think someone is touching him. Or when *anything* happens near him, basically.” He lay back on the bed and shut his eyes. “I think the house is inspiring me to be loyal to him and his mum because they have Black blood. Please, Ron. Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”

Ron breathed in silence for a few minutes. Then he said, “All right, mate. Since it means so much to you, I won’t talk about him.”

Harry opened his eyes and smiled at Ron. “Thank you.”

“But I don’t think you need his help anymore,” Ron plunged ahead, doggedly. “Hermione and I can help you, since you’ve finally *told* us the bloody house is still affecting you. Do you have to talk to him anymore?”

Harry hesitated. Here was help, from an unexpected direction, with curtailing his dependence on Draco. He had been thinking he should let Draco go, give him his freedom. Draco would want that, since, as Ron had pointed out, he’d been forced into helping Harry in the first place. It was something he would never have chosen to do of his own free will.

Harry should want that, too, shouldn’t he? He should want Draco to be happy more than anything else, if he really cared about him. If he just wanted Draco close to him instead, that showed he was under the house’s influence and cared more about what Draco could do for him than Draco’s happiness or health.

Slowly, he nodded. He tried to ignore the way that Ron beamed, because when he did that, something dark and low in the back of Harry’s mind snarled.

He wanted the numbers on his neck to keep changing, going down, Harry thought, half-listening as Ron vowed to spend some time in the library with Harry and Hermione instead of always being at

Quidditch practice. He wanted to be back to normal. He wanted to be able to live somewhere else, instead of Grimmauld Place, and he wanted to keep from torturing Kreacher.

But more than anything else, he wanted to give Draco his life back. He wanted to walk past him and listen to his laughter in the distance and know that he was having fun, that he wasn't consumed with the quest Harry had to figure out the darkness and how to escape from it.

"Yeah, mate," he said, when Ron paused and Harry could get a word in edgewise. "You're right. This is the best thing I can do."

Ron beamed at him again, and this time, the murmur in Harry's mind was overpowered by the certainty that he had done the right thing.

\*

Draco had brought the cauldron and the vial to Madam Pomfrey, but that still left a tumble of library books on the table and the cut-up gillyweed that Potter had used to create the poison. And Draco had retained a little of the potion for himself, in a vial he had been using to hold a Calming Draught he'd already taken.

There was all that, and there was the portrait frame.

Draco stood considering it the day after he'd taken Potter to the hospital wing. It was the first time Draco had had to himself since then, what with talking to the mediwitch and going to class and doing homework. He walked around the table, tapping his finger against his chin. The books on the shelves in the background of the picture looked like the ones that Professor Snape had had on his shelves, the few times that Draco had been in his private quarters sixth year.

*When he was trying to persuade me not to let Death Eaters into the school, or kill Dumbledore.*

Draco winced, and then took a deep breath. One way or another, that was the past now. He had to concentrate on what was in front of him, and he had come to terms with Professor Snape's death over the summer. What he had to do now was figure out whether this *was* the professor's portrait, or whether someone else had enchanted it in an attempt to get rid of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Draco took one more turn around the table, and then stopped. There was a figure forming in the portrait, amorphous and made of smoke, leaning forwards with a graceful little bob.

Draco stood there, barely breathing, waiting for it to form a face.

## From the Mists

“Draco.”

It was Snape, *Professor* Snape, not as thin and drawn as Draco had seen him during the last year of his life, but close to it. This might be the Snape who had tried to help him during his sixth year, and ended up fleeing into the darkness with him from the Astronomy Tower. Draco licked his lips and discovered that it was hard to speak. Indeed, the portrait, the figure in it now fully formed, went on speaking before he could.

“I wondered if I would see you here,” Professor Snape said, leaning one elbow on a bookshelf and studying Draco. “You wonder what I have done with the potion, of course, and why I would poison Potter.”

“You poisoned him passively,” Draco said, swallowing and forcing away the dryness that wanted to invade his throat. So his throat was dry. What did that matter? It wouldn’t have inhibited an orator like his father, and Draco was determined not to let it affect *him*, either. “You didn’t tell him that the potion was wrong, and needed either more time to cool or more ingredients than just the crystal and the gillyweed.”

Professor Snape’s smile was chill and faint. “Such uncertainty, Draco,” he murmured. “*You* do not know what it needed, either?”

Draco stood taller. “I want to know why you did it,” he said. “That, most of all. I can learn *what* you did by talking with Potter, if necessary.”

Professor Snape leaned forwards. “You ought to know the answer to both questions,” he said. “The same reason that you stand here in front of me instead of running far away and congratulating yourself on your escape from Potter.”

Draco sneered at him. That was easier than he had thought it would be, too. On the other hand, it almost certainly helped that the professor was just paint and canvas and an enchantment, now. He could only hurt Draco if Draco was *stupid* enough to follow instructions and poison himself, the way Potter had been. “Somehow I doubt that Potter pinned you to a wall and forced his way into your mind.”

“Considering reading a portrait’s mind has never been accomplished, even by the greatest of Legilimens, then I imagine that it would not be that,” Professor Snape interrupted, so serious that Draco found himself wincing a little. “But I was referring to the influence of the house.”

Draco stared at him. “Why would it influence *you*? You’re not a Black by blood. And you’re a bloody *portrait*.”

Snape folded his arms. “Do you truly understand nothing about how far some pure-blood families would go to ensure that each heir to the line is the same as the one before?” he hissed. “I would have thought you did, considering the desperation the Malfoys have sometimes showed to make half-blood spouses ‘acceptable’ and shape and condition them inside the walls of the Manor.”

“We’ve never influenced portraits this way,” Draco said flatly. The comments about his heritage

hurt, but he recognized them for what they were, distractions. “Say what you mean.”

“The house grasped hold of me.” Snape looked half-revolved, but Draco thought he saw something dark and smug sparking deep at the bottom of his eyes. “It made it impossible to resist. I was carried away into offering advice that I would not otherwise have offered, giving instructions that were not the right ones. I would have been able to talk rationally with Potter about it if he did not carry that bloody *influence* around him with like a *miasma*. As it is, I can act normally, and recognize the depth of my actions, only when Potter is not around.”

Draco spent some time blinking. Then he said, “I don’t believe that. His friends aren’t acting any different than they usually do.”

“Perhaps it would not influence Granger, since she is—not pure-blood.” Snape’s face grew drawn for a second, before he continued briskly. “And Weasley is opposed by his very nature to Dark magic. But *you*, Draco.” His voice grew soft in a way that made Draco shudder, it sounded so reminiscent of both Bellatrix and Potter when he was under the house’s strongest influence. Snape leaned closer. “Have you considered whether *you* have acted of your own free will since you came into contact with Potter?”

Draco shook his head. He knew it was too hard, given the buzzing in his ears. “I haven’t changed,” he said. “I *know* I haven’t. Potter has forced me to go with him to some places, and I’ve done things that I wouldn’t have otherwise. But all the time, I’ve complained to myself about it, and I’ve feared Potter, and I haven’t wanted to stay close to him.”

“Yet you came and rescued him yesterday,” Snape whispered. “So the house could have *both* ends of its bargain, could punish him through me and yet still keep its heir alive by influencing you to do the rescuing.” He paused, staring at Draco. Draco became aware that he was breathing shallowly and clenching his hands in front of him. Snape’s voice dropped further, became so soft a whisper that Draco strained to hear it. “Have you considered that?”

“And, what?” Draco’s voice croaked. He tried to clear his voice so that it wouldn’t, but from the rasp in his throat, that was probably a futile effort. “I j-just—I and you get influenced, and Potter’s friends don’t, because we’re Dark and they’re not?”

Snape’s eyes glittered harder. “Exactly.”

Draco took a step back, then another. “I never heard of a house that could spread its influence so widely,” he said.

“Maybe most of the time, it did not have to.” Snape shrugged, but Draco knew that he wasn’t imagining the bitterness in his eyes. “Maybe most heirs did not struggle against the plan that the house laid down for them. Perhaps they *wanted* the wealth and the continuity with their ancestors.” His voice became a hiss like acid. “But Potter, of course, must be *different*.”

“You can’t blame him for that,” Draco said, less because he wanted to than because he thought it might still be whirling in the middle of his head. “He wasn’t raised in any kind of family that he would want to have. Muggles move from house to house, my mother told me once, and not many of them live in the same place for generations. He wouldn’t understand...”

He had to trail off, because Professor Snape was staring at him, and it was hard not to think that he *should* shut up when faced with that. “What?” he added, aware that he sounded defensive.

“You are apologizing for *Potter*,” Snape whispered. “You are insisting that I should understand *Potter*.” He shook his head, looking a little dazed, except that Draco knew full well he was never *that* dazed. “And yet you would claim that the house has not influenced you.”

“It’s possible to try and understand someone that you don’t feel much sympathy for,” Draco said, coldly, refusing to think about what Snape’s words implied. “I *had* to try and understand Potter in the past few days, or he might have murdered me. He got all possessive and angry when he thought Granger was touching me.”

Snape paused again and looked at him. Draco lifted his head. No, he was not afraid of what Snape might see in the bottom of his eyes, he told the voice whispering in the back of his head. Snape was only a portrait, and Draco was still alive. That meant he was still doing better than Snape, no matter how you looked at it.

“Now I begin to see,” Snape whispered. “I had wondered why you would put up with such treatment from Potter, even with the house’s influence. It had to struggle against your past history with him, and while it might have some help from your Black blood, no *Malfoy* should have put up so tamely with what Potter asked of him.”

“And now you think you know the reason?” Draco heard his own lightly mocking voice from a distance, like the voice of a stranger in another world. “Do tell.”

“There is part of you that desires him,” Snape said bluntly. “Another that rejoices in being desired, no matter the consequences.” His voice dropped. “Draco. No matter what the Dark Lord did to you, what he convinced you of, you are worth more than this.”

Draco fell back a step, shaking his head, before he thought about it. Then he straightened his spine. He’d just finished thinking that he was better than Snape and had no reason to be afraid, hadn’t he?

“It’s not like that,” he said. “Yes, I did find it exciting to think he desired me. But it has a lot more to do with *him* than the Dark Lord.”

“Who convinced you that you were undesirable, and even attention from the twisted ones in power would be better than no attention at all?” Snape’s eyes were ancient and haunted, and Draco found he had to turn his head to the side. “It was not Potter. He could not have that kind of impact on you, not when you first met him as your father’s spoiled darling.”

And Draco found air to breathe, room to move. That only proved that Snape hadn’t understood Draco as well as Draco always thought he had. He turned back and shook his head. “No,” he said. “You have no idea what having him turn on me, choose me over Weasley, did to me. I wanted his attention. I *craved* it. Maybe this is more than that, maybe this is influenced by the house, but it’s not the Dark Lord’s influence.”

Snape blinked at him. “You will succumb to that influence if you remain near him,” he murmured. “I did myself, and it is like remembering through a veil of mist. Stay away from him, Draco.”

Draco turned his back and began to walk down the corridor that led towards the more populated parts of the Slytherin dungeons without replying.

“Draco?” Snape was raising his voice now, sounding as if he were dangerously close to shouting. “Can you hear me?”

“I hear you,” Draco said, looking over his shoulder and holding the portrait’s eyes with his own. “I simply don’t choose to acknowledge you.”

And he faded into the distance, leaving Snape to shout after him impotently.

## Diary of a Black

Harry glanced around. He thought he was alone here, but he had been wrong about that before. Hermione and Ron seemed to have decided that he couldn't get into any trouble if he wasn't alone, and they followed him into the library, into the bedroom, into the Great Hall, even into the bloody *bathroom*. At least Hermione let Ron do that part.

But now he was on the top of the Astronomy Tower, after Summoning his broom while the rest of them were asleep and flying out the window. Harry thought this was as close as he was likely to come to privacy while Ron and Hermione were still on full alert.

Harry sighed. It wasn't like he really *wanted* to avoid his friends. He'd done that so far, and what had it gained him? Only a ridiculous, misplaced trust in a portrait and time in a hospital bed.

But on the other hand, it had finally occurred to him that he had a different source of information than Snape, whom he would try to fry, or the books, which Hermione couldn't find anything of interest in, or even Draco, whom Harry didn't want to drag back into this mess.

He had the diary that Narcissa Malfoy had owled him.

Harry dug the book out of his pocket. He should have looked at it a long time ago, he thought, shaking his head. He should have looked at it the evening Draco had handed it to him, instead of dragging Draco off to Grimmauld Place, and then to Gringotts, and getting involved in all those maneuvers that had hurt Draco and probably wouldn't work anyway.

He flipped the book open and looked again at the title page. There was a shaky hand there that formed large letters that seemed like twigs. Only when he bent near the paper could he make them out.

*B. B.*

Those stood for Bellatrix Black, Harry was sure of it. There was no one else in the last few generations of the Black family who held those initials. And this time, he had checked the family tree—carefully, while Hermione thought he was doing research on a different aspect of the curse of the house's influence.

Harry traced the letters with one finger. He didn't really understand why Bellatrix would have become the house's heir, when there were two people who could be still alive. If there was anything he had learned, it was that the house was patient. After Regulus died, it would just have waited until Sirius came out of Azkaban. And then it had probably influenced him as hard as it could when he was stuck in Grimmauld Place, and that was the reason he had acted so recklessly and put his life in danger.

On the other hand, maybe even houses could get impatient. And from the few pages Harry had glanced at so far, he thought that the house had reached out to Bellatrix in a desperate attempt at a substitute.

*And probably because she was pretty bloody mental even then, and they would get along great,* Harry thought, rolling his eyes.

When he flipped through the pages, they crinkled warningly, and Harry winced and slowed down. He reckoned they must be pretty bloody old, and he wasn't going to get anywhere by mistreating them. He spread the book flat on his knees and looked at the first entry.

*The walls are speaking to me.*

There was an excited dot of ink on the end of that sentence that Harry didn't think was an exclamation mark. He swallowed and flipped the page, since it turned out that single sentence was all the first one contained.

*I have gone through my killing. Mother says that she is proud of me, but she also looks at me with fear in her eyes. I know what she's thinking. The main line, and Cousin Walburga, and the way that I shouldn't be doing this. Cousins Sirius or Regulus should be doing this. They're the heirs. They're the ones who are descendants of the direct line, and the ones that the house should have chosen.*

*But Cousin Sirius has rejected everything we stand for, for years, and Cousin Regulus is a baby. The house needs a strong heir. That's what it told me, and I have no reason to doubt it.*

*The Muggle's head will look fine on the wall.*

Harry shuddered and flipped a few more pages. He should have reckoned that one of the Muggle kills was Bellatrix's.

There were a few more single-sentence entries, all of them cryptic, but most of them exulting about something the house had done, seemingly. Harry had to wonder how much time Bellatrix had spent at Grimmauld Place. Had Walburga welcomed her even though Regulus was still alive then, because it seemed as if the house would need an heir before Regulus came of age? Or was she trying to drive Bellatrix away, but she couldn't do it because the house wanted her there?

Then there was an entry that seemed to give the answer.

*Poor, poor Cousin Walburga. It must be painful to know that you were lacking as a mother and couldn't produce the heirs that the house needed, even with Black blood on both sides. But I'm here now. There's no reason to mourn. The house and I will do it together.*

Harry swallowed and flipped some more pages, wondering what had happened. This diary might be even more valuable than he had thought. Somehow, Bellatrix had escaped being the house's heir. She might not have rejoiced at that, but the house had let her go. Why? Could Harry somehow do the same thing she had done, commit the same crime, and duplicate the circumstances?

*Maybe I could even get Draco to help me with that.*

He arrived at the last page. There was a great streak of ink down the top of the page, which Harry flinched away from even though he didn't think it was concealing blood or anything. Then he noticed the entry below.

*It's done. The house doesn't need me anymore. It's focused on Regulus. It seems that being a descendant of the direct line is what you really need after all. And I was about to undergo the ordeal, too!*



And that was it. Harry cursed under his breath and turned back. The goblin at the bank had mentioned an ordeal, too, but he didn't know any details. And now Bellatrix wouldn't mention them, either. It was infuriating!

He did see a longer passage he'd skipped over in the middle of the book before, because it didn't seem to have much to do with getting free of the house, and he dived into it, hoping that it would tell him about the ordeal if it didn't tell him why the house had suddenly rejected Bellatrix.

*Cousin Walburga said something strange to me today when I came out of the training room. She said that I should watch out, because the house prefers pure-blooded heirs. I'm as pure-blooded as they come, and I told her so. None of my mother's family ever bred with filthy Muggles, and my Black blood is just as good as hers!*

*But she smiled at me, and said softly, "Pure blood means more than just lack of Muggle blood or a direct line, my dear. The house likes heirs of Black blood, and it likes heirs of the proper temperament, and in that respect, you suit it well. But it likes even more heirs that are appointed by someone in the direct line. You weren't, as I'm sure you remember. If the person appointed doesn't yield, the way Sirius hasn't, then it might draw other people into its orbit trying to make them do so." She leaned towards me, and her eyes stuck out like a bug's. I hate bugs. I'm going to kill all the ones in my room as soon as I finish this entry.*

*"Sirius is too stubborn," Cousin Walburga whispered, her voice taunting. "But it will ruin his life in time. And it has Regulus. His father is going to appoint him heir soon. Be prepared to have your life changed."*

*I remember everything she said because it was so strange. But I have to put it out of my head. Regulus might be appointed, but he's still just a baby. A House takes an appointed heir first who's of age. Everyone knows that. And I'm the only one in the family who's reached that age and is living here.*

Then, a few pages later, the house apparently rejected Bellatrix for some reason.

Harry bit his lip, hard. He wondered if he could appoint someone else heir and get the house to choose them that way, except that he didn't want to ruin someone else's life the way his was being ruined.

He looked back at the passage, and his eyes paused on some words he'd almost ignored the first time.

*it might draw other people into its orbit.*

Harry wanted to gag. He was thinking suddenly of Draco and the way he'd seemed to go along with things after a while, and the way Snape had told Harry himself about the potion when he'd had no reason to do so. Granted, Snape had ended up poisoning him, but maybe that was a way of trying to fight back against the house's influence.

Harry stood up, shivering. He had felt more like himself lately, but where had the house's influence gone? It wouldn't just *leave*. Maybe it went somewhere else. Maybe it spilled over onto innocent people.

Maybe Draco was suffering right now.

Harry turned and left the Astronomy Tower, no coherent thought in his head but to make sure that Draco was all right.

## Dance in the Darkness

“Malfoy.”

Draco opened his eyes, instantly aware. He had picked up that skill during the war; one of the favorite tricks of the adult Death Eaters had been to shake him out of a sound sleep and shout orders at him while he was still struggling to deal with being awake. So he sat up now, and turned towards the sullen voice, doing nothing but raising his eyebrows.

“Potter’s by the door of the common room, shouting that he wants to come in.” The vague shape scowled at him, and Draco finally recognized the voice as Elias Grassburn, one of the boys who had been in their sixth year last year. “He wants to see you. A first-year who was up studying told a prefect, and the prefect told me, and I’m telling *you*. It’s your problem. You go deal with it.”

Grassburn stumped back to bed. Draco stood up, frowning a little as he made sure that his robes were closed tight around him and that he’d left his boots where he thought he had. He didn’t know why Potter had waited by the common room door instead of slipping into Draco’s bedroom the way he had the night Kreacher was injured. But whatever magic had guided his movements that night seemed to have deserted him.

He strode down the steps into the common room. There was no one there now, and the flickering fires were as sullen and low as Grassburn’s voice. Draco shook his head and went to open the door.

Potter immediately stood up and straightened from a slump against the stone wall. He was staring at Draco with a longing that made Draco feel like the last pool of pure water in a desert. He cleared his throat uncomfortably and waved Potter in.

“You’re safe,” Potter said, staring at Draco as though he wanted to memorize his face and use it as a beacon later in life.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Draco said, and pulled Potter into the room when the gormless git would just have stood there staring. “I have to tell you something Snape said, though. I went back, and he was in the portrait. According to him, he really didn’t try to kill you on purpose.”

“I figured that out.” Draco’s attempt to get Potter to sit down on one of the couches didn’t work. He turned around and went on drinking Draco with his eyes instead. “The house influences people, doesn’t it? It reaches out and makes them do what it wants. It made sure that you were there to save me, because it doesn’t want me dead, but it manipulated Snape into hurting me. So I would learn a lesson, I suppose.”

“That’s right,” Draco said slowly, a little surprised that Potter had figured that out by himself. “But what are you doing here? Did you have another encounter with the portrait?” It was the only thing he could imagine that might have brought Potter here to make sure he was safe. Perhaps the house had made the portrait threaten Draco.

Potter shook his head and looked around as though he had only now figured out where he was and why it might be strange for him to be there. “No. I was reading that book your mother sent me, which was Bellatrix’s diary during a time when the house chose her to be its heir.” He didn’t seem to notice Draco’s flinch at the mention of her name, but Draco reminded himself that Potter had

brought up seemingly unnoticeable things later. “And it suggested that the house could reach out and bend other people under its influence.” He turned and stared at Draco with eyes so large that Draco blinked. “I wanted to make sure that you were okay.”

“I am.” Draco nodded. He didn’t think bringing up his missed sleep right now would help much.

Potter gave him a strange, desperate smile. “And I want you to *stay* safe,” he said softly. “If this house can change me and Snape, then it could do the same thing to you. Maybe it’ll make you think that it’s okay for me to abuse you, or something.”

Draco lifted his head and locked his hands behind his back. “I have other experiences that make that unlikely,” he began.

But Potter ignored that and simply looked at him so intently that Draco blinked again. “I need you to stay out of this,” he said. “I have my friends helping me now. I finally told *both* of them the truth. I’ll have plenty of help. Stay away, okay? I don’t think you should be injured any further.”

“I wasn’t exactly *planning* on it.” Draco took an aggressive step towards Potter before he could stop himself. “But what right do you think you have to keep me away? If I want to do something, then I *will*.”

Potter shook his head. Then he said, “It doesn’t—it’s not about thinking you can’t handle it. It’s thinking that I’ve done enough to you already, with the ways I attacked you. That oath you made me swear was one of your best ideas. But I want to make sure that the house doesn’t attack you. The vow can’t protect you against that. So stay away.”

“You’ve made me your heir,” Draco said coolly. “You’ve promised me and my mother more money than we’ve had since the war. I was probably able to cast the spell that saved your life thanks to the house’s influence. It was too complex for me to do otherwise, what with the restrictions on my wand. And you think you can—what, cancel all that?”

“I think I can.” Potter’s body had gone still. Remembering the vow, though, Draco didn’t much care. “I think that you’d be bloody grateful, though. You never *wanted* me to take over or change your life, did you?”

“I never did,” Draco agreed, with a little nod. “That doesn’t mean that you get to send me away like a child.”

“I’m not doing it because I think you’re a child.” Potter had leaned back against the wall. “I think of you as someone who matters to me, someone I want to protect.”

Draco gave him a smile that felt queer even by his standards. “And you care about your friends, I know. But you’re letting *them* fight with you. Why should I be shut out? Why should I be the one wondering if you’re going to go mad any second and have no warning, because I don’t know if you’re growing saner or not?”

Potter stared at him, and his eyes had widened again and gone darker. Draco had no idea what was coming next, but he stood still, and folded his arms when the impulse to back away came on him. Everything he had said was true. He wanted to see this through to the end, and he thought his best option for doing that was to stay close and learn, from Potter’s friends if not himself, what was happening.

Potter stepped towards him, a strange smile of his own on his face, and his arms held out. "Dance with me," he whispered.

"What?" Draco wanted to laugh.

"I want you to dance with me," Potter whispered again. "After that, if you want to stay in contact with me, then you still can. But not until you fulfill this last request of mine."

"Last requests are made by people who are about to be executed," Draco said dryly, but he held out his hands, and clasped them with Potter's. Potter all but purred, his eyes shut so firmly that it looked as if he might never open them again.

Draco had wondered what music they would dance to, but they whirled and stepped in easy time in the middle of the common room, to music that Potter did no more than hum. His voice was so faint that Draco felt uneasy, and rested a hand on his chest to check if he was breathing.

Potter opened his eyes and smiled lazily at Draco. "You feel wonderful," he whispered.

They were still dancing, stepping sideways and then backwards, towards the couches and fireplace and then away from them. But the music was gone, and Draco knew something had changed. "Thanks," he whispered, the only word that would come to mind.

Potter closed his eyes and began to hum the tune again.

Draco watched him, and tried to remember whether his mother had told him any stories of Black ancestors who went into bursts of madness having to do with music. He didn't think so. He was whirled and pressed, taken close and then retreated from, and if felt as if they were the only people in the school.

*Like dark phoenixes*, he thought, for no reason, and started a little. The reference was familiar, but he couldn't remember from where. That might be the house's influence on him. He would have to try looking it up.

Finally, Potter's humming ceased again, and they stood next to one of the couches, close enough that Draco could feel an arm poking him in the ribs. Potter's eyes opened slowly, dazed and distant and gentle.

"Will you stay away?" he whispered.

Draco took a deep breath. His hands tingled where they clasped Potter's, and he tightened his hold on them.

"No," he whispered.

Potter lifted his head and watched him with soft, narrow eyes. Then he nodded once and turned his back, walking towards the common room door.

"Then I'll see you in the library tomorrow," he murmured, and passed into the corridor.

Draco remained there to shiver.

He had had only a glimpse of Potter's neck when he lifted his chin, and the light was uncertain,

with the fires dying. He *could* have been mistaken.

But he thought the scars on Potter's neck were confused, caught in a state somewhere between the curves of a three and the straighter lines of a four.

## Obdurate

“What are you sighing about?”

That was Ron, always forthright, even though Hermione was already leaning across the table to poke him in the arm and hiss at him to shut up. Harry sighed again and leaned back in his chair, wondering how he could possibly explain it. *I tried to seduce Draco last night to get him out of this, and he wouldn't listen to me?*

That had been what the dance had been, although he had only understood it afterwards. Make Draco even more scared of him, and Draco would back off. He wasn't stupid. He had his safety to think of first, and that mattered more to him than any of the money Harry had promised him.

*It has to, when he lived through a war.*

But it hadn't worked, and Harry had been aware of the way Draco stared at him in the Great Hall today. He hadn't approached him during classes, or now that Harry and Ron and Hermione were in the library trying to do some research on the house, but it was only a matter of time. Draco was not going to be pushed out of this.

That just meant Harry had to make matters less dangerous, before Draco could intervene again.

“Realizing how hopeless this is,” Harry said, instead of confessing the truth. He flipped the book in front of him shut. It was yet another useless tome about the pure-blood lines, and he knew that he wouldn't find anything about the Black house in it, because he'd already used the searching and copying spells Hermione had taught them to find any useful information in a book. “We don't know what the house really wants, we don't know what makes the house reject heirs, we don't know what makes the numbers on my neck increase—”

“Did they do it again? Let me see!” Hermione was up in instants, leaning across the table as though the numbers on his neck were a running sore that she was a Healer for.

Harry fended her off irritably. Hermione took a long second to sit down, but at last she did. “Yeah, they did,” he said. “Last night. I was just—I was thinking about getting Draco out of things.” That was true enough. “They had no reason to increase. But they went up again.” He dragged his hands through his hair. “I don't even know what this stupid ordeal is that the house wants its heirs to face.”

“Ordeal? You didn't say anything about one of those.”

Ron's voice was sharp. Harry lifted his head and frowned at him. “Yeah, I did. When I was explaining in the hospital wing.”

“No, you didn't.” Ron glared at him. “I would have remembered.”

Harry held his hands up and shook his head. “Fine, fine. There is some kind of ordeal that the heirs to the house go through. Apparently it's the final step before they become totally mental and really Black. But the goblin at the bank just hinted about it—I don't think he would have told me even if he knew—and Draco didn't know anything about it when I asked him, either.”

“Draco this and Draco that.” Ron pulled a face. “Why would he?”

“Because he and his mother are the only ones with the Black blood still alive?” Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Wrong!” Ron pounced on that with more enjoyment than he should have showed, Harry thought, but at least he looked a little sheepish as he pointed a finger at Harry. “There’s Andromeda, too. And Teddy, but I can’t imagine you’d get much help from him. Andromeda might know more than anyone about it, though.”

Harry swallowed slowly. Yes, that was true. On the other hand, she might know as little as Sirius apparently did, and for the same reason; she would have distanced herself from her crazy family as soon as she could, long before she married a Muggleborn.

But that was no excuse for not asking her. Harry had to admit that. The sticky reluctance clinging along his limbs, the whisper in his ears that asked for more time and said that Draco should be the one to provide the solution instead, was what he had to ignore.

“All right,” Harry said. “That’s an idea.”

Ron nodded. “In the meantime, you would be best off looking in books of fairy stories than books like that.” He indicated the books in front of Harry, with what Harry thought was distaste. “If I’d known about the ordeal, I could have told you already.”

Hermione pounced this time. Harry thought it had been driving her mad that Harry got to ask the questions in the last little while, before she got her mouth open. “What do you mean? What does that have to do with anything?”

“There are some ordeals that have become fairy tales,” Ron said. “You know, someone ran away from their family and told their kids a scary story, and they told someone else, and then it became a story everyone knows. I don’t know if you can trace any story back to a Black family ritual, but at least the stories could give you an idea of what the ordeals are like.”

“Ron, you’re *brilliant*,” Harry said.

Ron leaned back in his seat and nodded soberly at him. “About time you recognized it. So few people ever do. I’m the unsung genius of Hogwarts.” He placed his hand over his heart and sighed.

“Let’s find books of fairy stories, then,” Hermione said, standing up and turning to walk back into the shelves as though she had a new purpose in life. “I’ve only ever read *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*.”

“The ones about ordeals wouldn’t be in there,” Ron said. “Too scary. Try *Unknown Secrets of the Fiery Mountain*. That was one my Mum used to threaten us with stories out of when we were a kid.”

Hermione disappeared in one direction, and Harry was about to open his mouth and ask Ron what other titles he should look for when Draco walked into the library.

Harry narrowed his eyes and stood up. “Ron, do you want to search with me?” If they were all gone searching, then there was no way that Draco could corner him and demand to know how the



quest for information on the house was going. And if Ron hadn't made the connection to the ordeal until Harry mentioned it, Draco was unlikely to know what they were doing just by watching them come back with books of fairy stories.

"Harry."

The word poked Harry in the breastbone and curled like a hook through his heart. He turned around and stared at Draco. Draco looked a little embarrassed, but held his ground, extending his hands towards Harry.

He had never, ever called Harry by his first name in that low voice. He had said it before at some point, surely, but the memory vanished behind what felt like a wall of fire in Harry's head.

"Harry," Ron hissed in turn.

"Just a minute," Harry murmured, and walked towards Draco, feeling as though he floated on air. Draco watched him, one hand curled in front of his chest.

"What do you want?" Harry asked when he came close enough. He knew his voice should have been a shout—it was the only effective way to drive Draco off when he couldn't touch him or use magic on him—but it was soft instead. Harry shook his head and tried to focus. "Didn't that dance convince you that I'm dangerous?"

"Not the dance," Draco said, dryly. "It was all the other things you did, like pinning my hand to the wall."

"You do think I'm dangerous?" Harry folded his arms. "Then why are you *here*?"

Draco's eyes were ablaze in a way that Harry hadn't seen them in a long, long time. Maybe since fifth year, he thought, when Draco had been working with Umbridge. He folded his arms in turn and leaned in towards Harry.

"Because I've had it with being driven away from something I want to do," Draco whispered. "I was a coward and a liar, and fine, that helped me survive. But this is *private*. No one knows about this. You're not going to taunt me, and your friends aren't going to taunt me."

"All the more reason for you to *back away*," Harry pointed out sweetly. Ron was watching them with a frown, he saw. Hermione hadn't come back yet.

"I would know about it," Draco said simply. "And this time, there's no Dark Lord. Sooner or later, I've got to stop running and do something, or I'll live in fear for the rest of my life and it'll control my actions. I've decided this is what I want to not run from."

Harry trembled a little. It was true, his deepest *desire* was to have Draco with him, to have his help in investigating the house, and that would mean he could also have him nearby when—

But he cut that line of thought off. His desire was one of the dangers to Draco. Draco had to go.

"Leave," he said.

"No." Draco glared at him.

Harry snarled. “You know,” he said, somewhere from beyond the haze of darkness that seemed to be floating across his brain, “you made me promise that I couldn’t touch you with hands or magic.”

“Yes.” Draco was still.

“You never said anything about the house’s influence,” Harry said, and reached *out*.

## The Miasma

The haze touched Draco.

He felt his mind swimming, his perceptions softening. It was similar to the way he had felt when Potter used Legilimency on him, but not as painful. This was—something else.

Something that drifted into his mind, pushed in his soul, and told him, in the gentle but utterly certain voice his mother had used to discipline him when he was young, that he was going to do as Potter wanted. He would walk away. He would forget about the house. He would do something over in the corner until Potter wanted him. He would be gentle and obedient and courteous and everything that a pure-blood child should be.

That hit something else, a chord that jangled and rang all through him. Draco gasped. It was as if he was a piano that someone had been playing perfectly up until that point, and then a second hand smashed down on the keys.

*I'm not a child.*

The rejection of that sentiment coursed through his body, and the haze began to retreat. Draco lifted his head and opened his eyes, although part of him thought it was the hardest thing he had ever done.

Potter was staring at him, one hand held out as if he could stop Draco from coming closer. His whole body was shivering.

“You can’t force me away like that.” Draco was a little astonished at how calm his voice sounded, but then, he had *held back* the change that Potter had wanted to force on him. He even took a step forwards, and Potter retreated while looking around as though he expected help from his friends. Only Weasley was in sight, and he was staring at them as though he didn’t know what was going on and didn’t want to intervene. *A wise choice.* “I told you the reasons I want to stay. Maybe they’re mental reasons, but they’re mine.”

He felt his heart lift as he spoke, and had to smile a little. *Sorry, mother. I know that you don’t want me to attract attention, but I’ve already done it. I probably did it the minute I followed Potter. Or, hell, the minute he inherited the house. Maybe he would always have sought me out.*

Potter stood in front of him for long enough that Granger emerged from the aisles, her arms loaded with books. “I didn’t just find *Unknown Secrets of the Fiery Mountain*, Ron,” she said proudly, looking up. “I found lots of other books that had ominous words in the title and I think they can—”

She nearly let loose of her armful when she saw Draco standing there, but then she turned and carefully put it down on the table behind her. Of course she did, Draco thought, his heart pounding crazily. She would never deliberately hurt books. Then she turned around, planted her hands on her hips, and asked, “What’s going on?”

Potter opened his mouth. Draco knew the next words that would emerge were a lie, and he tried to speak over the top of them.

But Weasley got there before either of them could. “We’re trying to find descriptions of the Black family ordeal that it puts its heirs through in some of the fairy stories,” he told Draco. “I think a distorted version of it could be there. Want to help?”

“*Ron.*”

Potter’s voice was low and furious, and Draco thought he saw the black haze he carried with him curling visible in the air for a second, extending towards his friends. But Weasley watched him with his hands flat on the table, and the haze seemed to lose direction. It coiled and snapped back into Potter, who shook his head dazedly. He didn’t have complete control of it, Draco reckoned. It must make him dizzy.

“Malfoy deserves the right to know and to help out if he wants,” Weasley said quietly. “I saw what you almost did to him, Harry. If he can resist that, he’s determined enough to have a part in this.”

Potter stared at his friend with his mouth slightly open. Then he slammed it and turned his back, towards Draco again. His eyes were luminous now, and Draco wondered if *Potter* understood half the changes he was going through, what his mind was doing, or the decisions he made from one moment to the other.

“You don’t want to get hurt, do you?” Potter whispered. “And you know that I want you, Draco, and that I’m afraid you’ll get hurt. Please stay away. Can you do it for me, if you can’t do it for yourself?”

From the way Weasley started, Draco thought, there had been at least one person in the room who hadn’t been aware that Potter wanted Draco. But Potter might as well have forgotten his friends. He never looked away from Draco’s face, and his breath had stopped.

Pity as much as anything else—and the desire for Potter to keep breathing, so that his death couldn’t be blamed on Draco—made Draco shake his head. “I don’t want to stay away,” he explained, when Potter still wouldn’t breathe, wouldn’t move, wouldn’t do anything but stare at him. “I was there at the beginning of this trouble, whether or not I wanted to be. I want to be there at the end. I want to make sure it *stops*. Think of it as wanting to be there when your enemy dies, so that you know he’s dead.”

“Those aren’t the reasons you gave just a minute ago,” Potter said, with the frown deepening on his face.

“I’m not allowed to have more than one set of reasons?” Draco raised his eyebrows. He almost enjoyed the frustrated glare Potter gave him. He knew that Potter’s confusion sprang much more from his own confusion and frustration, and the house taking over his brain, than from what he was like normally. Yes, Potter thought Draco should have only one set of motives, because the house thought he should.

*To become the Black heir’s consort.*

Draco shivered. He didn’t know if Potter had ever thought of it in those terms, but the house might have. The house might be responsible for the phrase suddenly springing to life in Draco’s brain, maybe.

Well, Draco refused. If he was going to be anyone’s consort, it was the original Harry Potter’s, who had a fire Draco liked and who owed Draco some attention for rejecting him in the first place,

damn it.

Draco blinked. Well, *that* was a new thought.

Not so new that he wanted to reject it right away, though. He wanted to play with it, and think about it some more, and then decide whether it was interesting or just weird.

But he didn't get the chance right now. Potter was pressing forwards again, and his hands were reaching out. Draco coughed, a cough with the word "vow" in the middle of it, and Potter stopped and backed away from him.

"Fine," he snapped suddenly, and turned towards the table where the books were laid out, practically flouncing over to sit down at it. "Help if you want to. Although we haven't found anything yet and we probably won't find anything, whether you're here or not."

Potter's friends both frowned at him for that. Feeling as though the sun had shaken loose from the sky—since when did Potter's friends approve of *him* and disapprove of something Potter had done?—Draco sat down gingerly at the table and looked from one of them to the other.

"Here," Granger said, and pushed a fairy tale book across the table to him. Draco checked the cover. *Black Stories and Others*. He vaguely remembered his mother reading him a few of them, although he didn't remember what they were about. "I figure this is the most promising title."

"And I should have the easiest one," Draco murmured, flipping open the book. Granger's haughty look told him she had heard, and wasn't going to bother to refute the charge.

Draco scanned the table of contents. *The Black Magic. The Darkened Age. The Crown of Ashes*.

All nice, cheerful titles. Draco couldn't remember why his mother had stopped reading them to him, whether it was for that or some other reason. But he didn't think she would have been frightened of Dark magic being mentioned in the stories. Maybe Draco had mentioned something he shouldn't, in front of one of Father's more shaky allies.

He felt a stare on him. He looked up, and found it was Potter. Weasley and Granger were both buried in their books, or making valiant attempts to pretend they were.

Potter shook his head a little and mouthed, *You should have gone while you had the chance*.

Draco raised his eyebrows. "I chose," he said, aloud, but so softly that Weasley and Granger could go right on ignoring him.

"You'll be sorry," Potter hissed, and turned towards his book again.

Weasley's ears turned red, but he didn't look up. Granger sighed. Potter ignored both of them in turn.

Draco went back to his reading. He knew that he felt right, now that he was back in the center of things again.

And no one was going to control him. Which meant that Potter wasn't going to influence his mind or decide to send Draco to his room until he got back from doing adult things.

*I'm not a child. I'm going to be what I want to be.*

## Stirrings of Rebellion

“Where are you going, Potter?”

Harry closed his eyes. He *had* hoped that he would have some time to himself after they had left the library. Nothing in the books so far had looked like a retelling of the ordeal of the Black house, and Hermione had said firmly that she had homework to do. Ron had trailed after her, giving Harry an apologetic smile.

And Harry could finally go flying. It was the only thing he could think of that might soothe the crashing, colliding cacophony in his head.

Instead, Malfoy was behind him. Harry told himself to think of him that way, not as Draco. Malfoy the rival, Malfoy the pain in the arse. Then there was the chance that he would manage to escape this tormenting feeling of longing, and escape dragging Draco—Malfoy, damn it—further into the web.

“To the Quidditch pitch,” he said, his voice rising. Not that it wasn’t easy to raise it, from the deep growl that seemed to have taken it over, when he thought of the way Draco had rejected the chance to go free. “You don’t have to come.”

“But I might want to,” Draco said, as neatly as if he had expected Harry’s response and prepared the counter, and fell into step beside him.

Harry set up off the corridor, keeping his eyes straight ahead. The less time he spent looking at Malfoy, the more time he could spend with his mind free. He was already considering ways that he might be able to confront the house. Persuade it to free its hold over him.

He didn’t think burning it down would work. It had its own magical defenses, and it would probably twist his thoughts around and convince him that he had to burn it with himself inside or something. But Kreacher might be an option. Harry wouldn’t even have to torture him, he thought; Kreacher would be eager and proud to share the information on how to become a proper Black heir with Harry.

“*Potter.*”

Harry whipped around. He hadn’t been ignoring Draco deliberately. He had only walked along and done what he could to withdraw into his own head. How *dare* Draco sound as if Harry had committed some great crime by not hanging on his every word, or responding to his inane line about wanting to come with him?

Draco stood in front of him, his hands locked behind his back. He tilted a little backwards when Harry loomed up into his face, but didn’t retreat. He didn’t even seem intimidated, if the laughter that danced in the back of his eyes was any indication.

Harry started to reach out, and felt as though there was a web yanking at his hand. He pulled it back with a grimace. *That bloody vow*. Make the attempt to touch Draco without permission, and it had to remind him of its existence.

But it hadn't reacted when he reached out with the house's influence, Harry was almost certain. That had been all Draco. That might make the house's influence the best weapon he had left in this unequal contest.

A second later, Harry closed his eyes and put his hand to his forehead. But he didn't *want* to influence Draco. He didn't want to use the house as a weapon. He didn't even want, with all of himself, for Draco to see that he would be better off without Harry and leave him alone. He wanted him close, wanted to touch him, wanted to convince Draco that they belonged together and he could worship Draco...

But he didn't want that at the price of Draco's life, or sanity, which seemed to be what the Black house was preparing him for. He wanted Draco free, laughing, with his mind intact and his future secure. That would be worth all the treasures that the Black house might give him, or a single moment of Draco pinned beneath him with fear in his eyes.

"Potter?"

Draco's voice was gentler, softer, and he had come closer. Harry made himself lift his head, and speak before he thought. It was true that he had no idea about what should come next, but it was *possible* that Draco could help him, as long as Harry didn't do something stupid within the next few minutes.

"I want you gone, so you can be safe. I want you near, so that you can help me. And be with me." Harry turned his head, and whatever Draco saw in his eyes, it wasn't what he had been expecting, because he froze and stared at Harry. "And I want you in my bed, and in the house with me, and here at Hogwarts with the ordeal over with and the house consuming me, if that's what's necessary to make you happy. I don't understand what I feel. I don't want anything right now except a clear head."

Draco stared at him. Harry couldn't be sure, not with the miasma swimming across his perceptions, but he thought he was stunned.

Harry turned around to walk away. He had to do it now, while he still could.

And then—Draco touched him.

Of his own free will. Reaching out so that Harry didn't have to be the one to initiate the touch and risk the wrath of the vow. Harry came to a stop and rocked in place, his eyes shut. The warmth from Draco's hand spread through him and spiraled up to his heart, and there was no chance, now, that he could call Draco Malfoy. There was nothing left but the connection between them, sweet and sounding in his ears like a great bell.

Harry turned around. He had no idea what was in his face this time, either, but Draco crowded closer instead of away, and that was the greatest blessing Harry could ask for right now. He found himself tilting his head back, opening his mouth, begging without words for Draco to touch him, bless him, pour something into him.

\*

Draco had never known he could have Harry Potter like *this*, all but begging for Draco to take him.

The many, many meanings of the word *take* had never occurred to him before this, either.



With his skin tingling, his fingers almost shaking with the sensation, Draco touched Potter, curving a hand around his arm, around his shoulder. Potter leaned towards him, sideways like a pendulum, his mouth fluttering further open. Draco thought of what he could stick in there, and licked his lips, face hot.

“Please,” Potter whispered.

*Does he have any idea what he’s begging for?* Probably not, Draco had to answer himself. For that matter, *he* wasn’t sure how this had developed so fast, Potter swaying into him and practically pleading for a kiss, while Draco stood next to him, furiously interested and trying not to be.

“Let me stay with you,” Draco whispered. If Potter was in the mood where he would agree to anything right now, Draco would be a fool not to use it to press his own advantage. “Let me help you with the quest to break free of the house.”

“The...quest...”

Draco raised his eyebrows. Maybe Potter didn’t recognize the word in the trance state he was in. “The quest to help you free, find some version of the ordeal in fairy tales, and learn to recognize it so it doesn’t consume you,” he all but murmured in Potter’s ear, his fingers sliding up this time to Potter’s jaw. It was unexpectedly soft. Draco had thought he could break his fist on that firm chin, but right now it was as shaky as the rest of him. “Let me stay.”

“What—why?” Potter looked as if he was trying to gain some mastery of himself back, but it was hard when his eyes were half-closed and he needed Draco’s help to stand.

“Because I want to,” Draco said. *And no one tells me what to do.* That part could remain unspoken.

Potter swallowed, or tried. Draco didn’t even think the motion went all the way down his throat, it was so dry. Fascinated, he drew Potter closer and closer to him, one hand on his shoulder, his eyes locked on Potter’s face. He couldn’t look away.

Potter took a long, dusty breath and opened his eyes to look up at him. Draco leaned nearer.

“Let me stay,” Draco whispered. “Let me stay and I’ll touch you again.” He didn’t think he had to be any more specific than that. He was the one with the power at the moment. Potter was the one who *wanted* Draco to touch him. That meant Draco could ask for whatever he wanted and Potter would grant it, as long as Draco stood with at least one hand on his shoulder.

Potter’s eyes flickered to Draco’s lips, and the longing in them made Draco remember that odd little dance in the Slytherin common room. He licked his lips, and Potter’s gaze, this time, followed the motion of Draco’s tongue.

“Come on,” Draco whispered. “It’s not so hard, is it? To do what I want? To let me join you?”

And the moment trembled, flickered like light off the pendulum that Potter so resembled at the moment. *Hung.*

## Competition

God, how Harry wanted to give in and let Draco do whatever he wanted, have this one little reasonable request, because it meant that Draco would touch him, maybe even kiss him, and all of Harry had turned into a desert with longing for that kiss.

But the bell rang in the middle of his mind, a bell that reminded him of something, and it got louder and louder, until Harry had to listen to it more than he listened to the voice of his yearning for Draco's touch.

*He wants you to let him put himself in danger. He wants to join you in the quest for the ordeal, and meanwhile he would be in danger from you.*

A bucket of ice water down the back couldn't have been more effective. Harry shoved Draco away and whirled to face the far wall. He didn't wipe his lips, because there hadn't been a kiss, but he kept himself from touching them, either. He stood there, breathing hard, and heard Draco's astonished and wary breathing back from behind him.

Draco said something at last. "Harry?"

Harry snapped himself around. He would have said something, but Draco was standing so close, and baffled, and he'd said Harry's first name instead of calling him *Potter*, and it was too much to deal with. Given all the other emotions and the way Harry had wanted to get away from his friends and Draco and the endless, endless *pressure* of it all...

Harry began to run.

He heard Draco shout after him, and start after him, but Harry had always got away from Dudley and his friends when he had a few seconds' advantage, and he didn't think Draco would have had a reason to practice running. Harry slid down stairs, stamped through corridors, ran up another staircase as though Dementors were after him, and came out into the Quidditch pitch panting but free.

He Summoned his broom with a wave of his wand, and slipped onto it. This wasn't like the night when he had ridden it to the Astronomy Tower to read Bellatrix's diary. This was something he needed, something hard and blended with excitement and fear and fury of what he would do if he was left alone.

He kicked off from the ground.

This high, there was only him and the wind, only howling darkness that he could think of as an enemy if he wanted to, because it *would* kill him if he fell. He was that high, swirling around and attacking from a dozen different directions, and he kicked and screamed and yelled into the distance as though he still had someone to impress.

The ground wasn't impressed. The sky wasn't impressed. He shut his eyes and felt the wind tug tears from them, and *that* wasn't impressed, either.

He could keep going, he thought suddenly. He could ride to the horizon, over the Forest and away

and on. As long as he kept high enough and under the proper charms, no Muggles would see him. He could steal food if he needed to. Stop at Gringotts, change his vault to Muggle money and clear it out. Keep going, on over the ocean.

Never stopping. Never coming back.

The vision enchanted him so much that he let his broom drift towards the Forest. He was cursing softly under his breath, his hands fastened to the wood, and his mind was outracing him, pacing and lifting and rising and falling, spinning him visions of what he could have without the house hanging over his head.

And he would never see Draco again, either.

Harry hesitated, and that seemed to be all that was needed. Suddenly there was a dim shape on a broom beside him, and someone was shouting into his face.

“Come the fuck *down*, Potter, before you kill yourself!”

Harry jerked back when he recognized Draco. And that voice. It sounded exactly like the one Draco used to use to mock him when they competed at Quidditch, and when Draco taunted him about his parents, and when Draco tried to scare him by appearing as a fake Dementor. It was always about rivalry between them.

And Draco never wanted Harry to have anything he wanted. Not solitude and privacy, not time to fly, not the ability to get away from the house or leave Draco behind, if that was what he had to do to keep him safe.

Harry wondered suddenly how many of the things Draco had said and done in the past few days came from that old rivalry. Nothing had really changed for *Draco*, had it? Harry had dragged him into this against his will. And Draco had already proven that he could resist the house’s influence when he wanted, so he could go away and do whatever he wanted.

He was free, and Harry wasn’t.

The resentment throbbed in Harry’s throat and chest, and he retorted, “Make me!” and aimed straight at a cloud overhead.

It was getting dark, growing hard to see the clouds, but this particular one was rimmed with light from the setting sun, and Harry could still make it out. He rose, hard and fast. He rose and left the ground behind. He could hear Draco still yelling, but he’d lost the will to make him out.

He was never going to have what he wanted, the two things he *most* wanted—Draco at a safe distance from him and able to lead the ordinary life that the house had taken from Harry, or Draco touching him, willing to be there, not because of his Black blood or the house but because he wanted Harry back. The way he had touched Harry in the corridor was just another way to manipulate him.

He was a Malfoy and a Slytherin and a Black by nature, and it would be fatal for Harry to forget that.

“Potter, you *stupid*—”

Harry glanced to the side. Of course Draco had kept up with him, since he was a great flyer and Harry didn't have a broom that was incredibly fast now. Draco's face was pale, and he shot out one hand as though he would grip Harry's broom and hold him back.

*Restrain him.*

Harry clapped his heels to the sides and spun as he rose. He heard Draco shouting about that, too. Again he didn't have to listen to the words. He just laughed nastily and soared upwards.

It was freezing cold here, without the leather gear he wore during games to protect him. But that was the point, Harry thought. What was the good of being an orphan if you couldn't take advantage of the fact that no one was watching over you? And there was no Snape now, and no Dumbledore, and no Sirius. He was master of himself, whether or not he wanted to be. Draco could just get used to it.

Higher and higher. Harry glanced down once, and saw Draco hovering below, still staring upwards but apparently just as glad not to follow him. Harry smiled.

The edges of his eyes and his smile felt frozen. It didn't matter. He was here, and he was higher up than the whole rest of the world.

He was almost level with the cloud now. Around him sparkled the stars, more numerous and more lovely than Harry had ever seen them. His eyes picked out Draco, and Ursa Major. He remembered that much from Astronomy class, although almost nothing else.

Hell, would he have noticed the constellation Draco without his intense engagement with Draco as a person?

His lips twitched, and he thought he felt ice shards fall off them. He kicked his broom savagely and rose again. He was *going* to leave behind the stupid thoughts even if he had to fight them.

The wind seemed to embed shards of ice anew, this time between his fingers. It didn't matter, Harry thought. The house ought to be happy. He was higher than anything now, superior. And the air around him was pure, so it didn't matter whether or not his blood was. He wanted to shout to Grimmauld Place. *Am I finally a worthy heir of you? Are you going to leave me alone now, and stop pulling on me?*

There was a soft stirring around him. Harry stared. He thought it was a hallucination, and wondered exactly how high he had gone, to experience something like this.

There was a shape in front of him, a black dragon, or a coiled snake, like the ones he had seen in the shadows at Grimmauld Place. They stared at him, the many bobbing heads on slender necks, the one slender body. They were many and one at the same time.

*We will never stop pulling on you. Come face the ordeal.*

And it really felt as though Harry might want to, if the ordeal was no worse than this, rising up and up forever, doing something he loved and trusted, the one thing he was really good at in the wizarding world. His skill at Parseltongue had come from Voldemort. He had only got so good at Defense because of the war. But he was good at flying because he just *was*.

If this was the ordeal, he would go to meet it.

His hands numb on the broom, his eyelids twitching with the chill, he soared higher and higher, to meet the snakes.

## Midair

Draco couldn't understand exactly what Harry found so interesting in the crystal-sprinkled air above them, but he wished Harry would start acting sane again and come back to earth.

*And you're calling him Harry again.*

Draco rolled his eyes. So he was. That didn't mean he was going to worry about it when he had other things that were much more *pressing* to worry about.

He circled, craning his neck back. Harry was flying steadily towards some goal, he thought, his head thrown back and his hands clenched on the broom as though he was holding onto a lover. Higher and higher, and the only thing Draco could see above them was darkness, a cloud drifting by. It was getting hard to see, but even so, Draco thought he would have known if someone else was out here.

And what else could Harry be interested in? There weren't any trees with branches overhanging the Quidditch Pitch, and once again, Draco thought he would have known if any creature had flown this way from the Forbidden Forest.

Then he saw what looked like a coiled dragon or snake, hanging in the air above Harry's head and snapping open its jaws.

Draco felt fear touch him as though someone had taken a rod loaded with it and traced it straight down his spine. He kicked so hastily with his legs that for a second he didn't move the broom anywhere; he was just hanging there while Harry neared his doom above him. And then he found the speed and the courage somewhere, when he hadn't had them before to follow Harry that high, and shot up after him.

The sky was *opening* above Harry now, unfolding in dazzling patterns of blue and white and yellow, jagged and edged but only around the sides. The air in the center was smooth, like a pinwheel. But Draco could see the brooding darkness in that center, and didn't think that meant it was any safer.

"Harry!" Draco shouted. He doubted Harry heard him, the way his voice was immediately drawn into the torrent of wind and noise, but he tried anyway. He wasn't close enough yet to grab Harry's leg and try to drag him off the broom, which had been the immediate plan.

Harry didn't look down or back. In fact, he had an arm extended in front of him. Draco squinted, thinking for an insane second that Harry might be offering an owl treat to the dragon or snake or whatever it was.

No. Instead, he was offering it his bare fingers. And with teeth that shone as long as daggers in the sunlight, the dragon or snake or whatever the fuck it was was reaching back. Draco could hear a snarl deeper than his own heartbeat coming up its throat.

He wasn't close enough to reach. Draco didn't know that he had the ability to distract Harry from the thing anyway, not if it was a manifestation of the house or the curse on the house.

So he did the next best thing, and bent over the broom, hurtling upwards as if the snake or dragon

was the Snitch and Harry another Seeker. And as he came level with the both of them, he turned sideways and hit Harry as hard as he could, knocking him spinning and his hand away from the toothy mouth reaching for it.

There was a silence as thick and rich as an indrawn breath, although Draco mostly saw that the colors of the pinwheel above them had all darkened, turning rich brown or black, and Harry was turning to stare at Draco with a look of betrayal.

Then there was another breath, as deep as winter, above them.

And the dragon-snake uncoiled one of many necks and struck down, straight at Draco, open jaws and horned head shaking with fury, the roar deafening him, and the cold night air freezing his hands on the broom when he tried to dodge.

\*

Harry didn't understand. One second, he had been approaching the mouth of a dark tunnel guarded by hissing snakes. They had told him it was all right, that he didn't have to fear, that this was the ordeal by which he became rightful master of the House of Black. And nothing would stalk him anymore after this, either, because he had done what he was supposed to and no one could fault him for facing and passing the ordeal. His friends would be safe. Draco would be safe.

Now he was knocked aside with his head ringing and his glasses almost gone from his nose, and there was no tunnel. There was only a snake—or a hydra, that might be more accurate to name it, Harry thought—looming above him, and one head was biting at Draco, who looked too terrified to move.

A dark thought stirred in the depths of Harry's mind, something about how Draco deserved this for refusing to leave, and for coming after Harry to the pitch in the first place, when he had made it clear that he only wanted to be alone.

But he sent the idea away, impatiently. He had risked a lot trying to keep Draco safe. He had even risked controlling and alienating him by relying on the house's influence. The house had promised him Draco would be safe if he did this.

Like *hell* was he going to let the house harm Draco simply because Harry had got distracted and decided it would be best to pass the ordeal.

He drew his wand without thinking, and the first spell that sprang to his tongue was the one he had always used when he wanted to feel protected. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

The silvery stag manifested right there in the air with them, and didn't seem to have any doubt about who its enemy was, even though there were no Dementors around. It flew up and at the snake, its antlers tossing and rising, shredding the snake's underbelly, while its rich bugle muted the hisses of the hydra's heads.

The hydra recoiled and began to tear apart—and not just where the Patronus's antlers had touched it, either. The way it became mist and fog, and then less than mist and fog, was seriously impressive. Harry stared with his mouth open, blinking and shaking his head a little as the fog turned into tatters and then streaks against the air, and faded.

The Patronus charged up and down in the sky for a few seconds, turning around on one heel, and

rearing back to stab a bit of darkness that Harry reckoned had escaped from the original hydra. Then it spun and trotted back to Harry. It seemed to shine more than ever as Harry reached out and gently patted its neck.

“I know I haven’t summoned you much lately,” he told the stag softly. “I wasn’t even sure that I could call a happy memory enough to make you come to me.”

The stag nuzzled him, feeling like sleek snow, and then stepped back and glanced at Draco. Harry nodded. He thought he had used Draco for his happy memory to call the Patronus, although it had happened so quickly that it was difficult to remember.

“I’ll be careful,” Harry murmured. “And I’ll make sure that I call you again soon.”

“You *talk* to your Patronus, Potter?”

Draco’s voice, shaky but sounding as normal and clear as though he hadn’t just been almost eaten by a hydra. Harry smiled and looked at him. “If your Patronus was as strong as mine is, then you would talk to it, too.”

Draco sniffed. He was prying his hands off his broom shaft and shaking them one by one, as though he had lost feeling in his fingers. He probably had, Harry realized with a start. He had forgotten how cold it was, this high. Or else the draw of the hydra and the temptation to fly higher and higher and forget about what was behind him had lured him up here and made him ignore what his body was feeling at the moment.

“I’ve never managed to cast a Patronus of any kind,” Draco said. “Maybe I would talk to it if I had, yes.”

He met Harry’s eyes, and Harry swallowed. There was enough darkness in them that he thought he knew what Draco would say next—and he really had no choice but to agree.

“Shall we go back to earth?” Draco was already swinging his broom around as he spoke, aiming at the ground. “I think we have some things we need to talk about.”

And Harry nodded and followed, his body braced for the inevitable confrontation, and getting through it with a modicum of grace.

*I owe Draco this much, at least.*



## A Serious Conversation

Draco led his way off the pitch before he started talking. The way he saw it, he had to get Harry inside and away from the temptation of flying, or he might insist on holding the conversation in the air.

And even with Warming Charms, cast the minute Draco was sure that his hand wouldn't shake badly enough to drop his wand, Draco was freezing and wanted a fire to sit in front of. Even an abandoned classroom where they could burn some broken furniture would do.

Harry caught up with him near the front entrance of the school, and reached out to take his wrist. Draco let him, although he kept one hand on his own wand and tensed, ready to move if Harry should wrench his arm or otherwise show that he wanted dominance over him. The house had reached him all the way here. Draco didn't dare assume that its influence was completely gone.

"Your hands are so cold," Harry whispered, staring at them as if it was a foreign notion to him that anyone could ever get chilled.

"Flying without Quidditch leathers does tend to do that," Draco said, with a drawl that he hoped would conceal the way he trembled in proximity to Harry. And not all of that had to do with cold or fear.

The thought that had come to him in the library returned. *I want to be the original Harry Potter's consort, not some Black consort.*

Draco gritted his teeth and stamped on the notion. The only reason that *Potter* cared what happened to him at all was the Black family's obsessive interest in their own blood. The house wanted Draco close to Potter, and as soon as its influence was conquered or dissipated in some way, then Potter would find another interest. Probably Weasley's little sister.

Draco hated how spitefully jealous that made him feel. He could have pushed the She-Weasel if she was right there.

But she wasn't, and a fire wasn't, and Draco started walking, practically dragging Potter along with him.

"You saved my life," Potter said.

"Yeah, and you saved mine," Draco said, without looking over his shoulder. "I don't think that you need to worry about another pair of life-debts accruing for us."

"Will you *look* at me?"

Despite the feeling that it was a bad idea, Draco turned around and did it. There was a particular frustrated, yearning note in Potter's voice that Draco recognized. He had felt much the same way when he wanted Potter's attention and Potter wouldn't give it to him.

Five years of wanting it, a year of concentrating on other things, a year of thinking that both he and Potter were probably going to die. Draco supposed it was no wonder that he was so unprepared when he *did* finally get Potter to look at him. It wasn't like he had much practice in emotions of

any kind, except fear and despair and pain.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Potter whispered, brushing Draco’s hair out of his eyes. His touch was light, and shaking itself. Draco didn’t think he was suddenly feeling the cold. “But no matter what I do, I seem to. I tried to leave you out of things, and it hurt you. I tried to influence you to back away, and it hurt you. I drag you into things, and the hydra attacks you.”

Draco wasn’t in the mood to listen to Potter’s self-pity. “Let’s get in front of a fire,” he said crisply. “And then you can tell me how sorry you are and moan and whinge on and on, and maybe then I’ll listen to you.”

Potter opened his mouth, and closed it. He followed Draco along the corridors, and Draco ignored the looks he could feel Potter giving at his back. Potter had wanted his real opinion. He wanted the real Draco.

This was him.

\*

Draco didn’t speak again until the fire had been blazing for a few minutes and he had cast several Warming Charms on himself as well. Harry almost opened his mouth to ask if he was really all that cold, but shut it again. He had seen Draco’s fingers turning blue himself. Yes, he had been.

And he never would have been if Harry hadn’t lured Draco after him, to climb higher and higher towards the house’s hydra.

Harry didn’t say that aloud, though, because Draco would define it as more of his self-pity and wouldn’t want to listen to it. He sat down instead and watched Draco. They had already Transfigured the two uncomfortable chairs in the room into comfortable ones—or, well, Harry had. The kind of Transfiguration that the spell required was beyond the limited abilities of Draco’s wand right now.

Draco held out his hands, turning them back and forth in front of the fire and examining them critically. Harry felt his heart ache as he watched them. Draco might have got frostbite or even lost a finger because Harry just *had* to be selfish.

“You can stop staring at me as if you’re a little lost sheep and I’m your shepherd,” Draco finally said, looking up. “I think we should plan on how you’re going to face this ordeal instead.”

“What do you mean?” Harry said. “Find some way around the ordeal? What happened today proved that I can’t face it alone.”

Draco gave him a sharp look. “No, it proved that the ordeal isn’t irresistible. I rescued you. If it was all-powerful, I couldn’t have done that.”

“But I couldn’t have rescued myself.” Harry shivered. He still remembered the dark tunnel that the hydra had almost convinced him to fly down, and how real it had seemed. Only after Draco had body-slammed him out of the way had he seen the situation for what it really was.

“Then I should be with you,” Draco said. “All the more reason. But I’ve been thinking, and I don’t think that the house will give up. It wants you to undergo this ordeal. The goblin at the bank said something of the same, didn’t he? That you wouldn’t be a real Black until you underwent it.”

Harry swallowed and touched his throat, wondering for the first time in a while what number his scars showed right now. “You’re not talking about—giving in?”

“No.” Draco sounded disgusted. “I haven’t invested this much effort to back away and let you treat me like some kind of toy for the rest of my life. I’m talking about us going in to face the ordeal together, and in the meantime I’ll work out a way to rescue you when I see you falling too far into it.”

Harry thought he understood now. “We’ve been looking for a way to trick the house, but you think we need to—challenge it, and outface it.”

Draco blinked at him for a second, and then nodded. “Yes, exactly, Potter.” Harry ignored the sharp little jab of hurt under his breastbone when Draco called him by his last name. He had no right to request that Draco call him by his first, really. He had done enough to him not to merit any more intimacy.

Draco was going on. “The house won’t leave you alone until you undergo the ordeal. We do some more research about how to survive it, and then we go to face it. Make sure that you have your friends and me with you. Don’t let it suck you into a room by yourself.”

“I have no idea if it’ll be a room,” Harry muttered, but held up his hand when Draco glared at him. “I’m just saying, this wasn’t.”

Draco shrugged. “It’s trying to lure you in. It would rather have you in the house to undergo the ordeal, I’m sure.”

Harry grunted and nodded. They sat in silence for a few minutes, and then Draco sighed and leaned forwards to prod at the fire.

“There’s no telling what you’ll feel for me after the ordeal,” he said quietly, not looking at Harry. “You might still want me, or not. You might like me, or hate me. But I don’t think we can have any idea of what’s true and what’s not until after it. So we have to do this for—other reasons than just surviving.”

Harry swallowed. He didn’t think he could name what he was feeling.

But he did have one question to ask.

“What do the scars on my neck look like now?” he asked.

Draco cast him a surprised look. Harry sat back in his chair and craned his neck so Draco could make out the scars in the hollow of his throat.

Draco stared, then shook his head. “I can’t make it out. They’re a swirling mess of lines and curves. Nothing stable.”

Harry stood up abruptly and left the room. His heart was pounding, his hands shaking, and he didn’t think he could stay near Draco for another minute.

*I need to face this. Otherwise, what I don’t know is going to drive me mad, too.*



## The Ordeal Nameless

“That’s a good idea,” Hermione said. “To face it together. If we can find some record of the ordeal.”

Harry grimaced. He knew what she wasn’t saying. They had been through most of the books in the library now that had anything to do with rituals, ordeals, pure-blood families, and fairy stories, and it didn’t seem as though they had anything useful to go on. Draco had made it worse yesterday, although not on purpose, by suggesting that maybe the Blacks who passed through the ordeal never told anyone about it, and therefore the most they would have were distorted shadows from the minds of those who fled. Hermione had snapped that he wasn’t trying hard enough to save Harry, and Draco had sulked, and Ron had nearly drawn his wand when Draco wrote down an insult on a bit of paper and passed it across the table to Harry. Even reading it upside-down was bad enough, apparently.

“I’m starting to think that doesn’t matter,” Harry said, ignoring the way Hermione started. Draco was standing beside his chair, arms folded and foot tapping as if he were late for an important meeting in the Slytherin common room. At Harry’s words, though, he turned and looked at him. “I mean, it is a good idea to face it together. But we won’t know exactly what it’s like until we get there.”

“What do you mean, *there*?” Ron rubbed his arms briskly. “Where is there?”

Harry saw Draco blink. He evidently had thought Ron and Hermione would already know. Harry gave him a faint smile and turned back around to face his best friends.

“I mean the house,” he said. “We have to go to the house and face the ordeal. At least, you have to come with me as close as you can before the house shuts you out.” He was thinking about the hidden room Kreacher had shown him, full of the Black heirs’ kills. If there were places like that all over the house, then Harry doubted he would be able to bring his friends with him, no matter how careful he was to try.

Hermione and Ron spoke at the same time. It sounded like it was the same objection, though. Harry waited patiently until their voices died down, and then shook his head.

“We’ve tried as hard as we can to find some reference to the ordeal in books,” he said. “It was a good idea to look in the fairy tales, Ron, and if it had been there, I think we must have found it. But we don’t know, now. The best thing we can do is prepare a different way instead. Combine our memories of the house from the time we spent in it, and our knowledge of curses and hexes, and hope for the best.” He turned around and looked up at Draco. “I was hoping that your mother would be willing to lend us whatever memories she has of spending some time in Grimmauld Place.”

“She would,” Draco said. In front of Ron and Hermione, he seemed to be more subdued, except when one of them directly questioned him. He spent a lot of time watching Harry, and Harry felt the squirming delight in one corner of his mind and the worry in the other. Was Draco falling under the influence of the house? “She would probably want to come herself, instead of sending memories by an owl or in a letter. The Ministry may still be intercepting packages leaving our house.”

Harry blinked, opened his mouth to say that Narcissa had managed to send him Bellatrix's diary, and then closed it again. The sharp glint in Draco's eyes let him know that there was some other reason Narcissa wanted to come, maybe the sort that Draco didn't think should be mentioned aloud before Ron and Hermione.

"All right," he said instead. "She could meet us at the house. Maybe twice? Do we need one meeting to trade memories and one to actually assault the house?"

"Do we have to make it an attack?" Hermione asked. "Maybe Kreacher could help? He was already able to tell you a bit about the history of the house."

Harry shook his head. "I don't trust him. He was the one who knew exactly what would happen when I went into the garden, and he suggested I do it anyway."

Hermione stared him down. "He's still a source of information about the house, and one that we've been neglecting."

Harry bit his lip savagely so that he wouldn't make a comment that disparaged Kreacher, and nodded instead. "Then we can try and talk to him. But I don't think we can *trust* anything he says."

Hermione just looked happier that they were including a house-elf. Draco put his hand on Harry's shoulder for a second as Hermione turned to tell Ron about the many, many pieces of ancient and obscure knowledge that house-elves had about the families they served.

Harry leaned back in his chair and raised an eyebrow. It had to be something important to make Draco risk touching him like that. Ron and Hermione would focus on the hand in an instant if they saw it, and ask questions that Harry didn't think either he or Draco knew the answer to.

"Two meetings is best," Draco said. "And my mother would like to meet with us once alone."

Harry hesitated, and Draco's eyes flickered back to Ron and Hermione. Ron had engaged Hermione in a mild argument about house-elves. Since the war, Harry had come to recognize it as their form of flirting, and he had no fears that it would erupt into something serious, but it did make a nice distraction.

"The second meeting, they can come to," Draco breathed, light and quick. "Not the first."

After a second, Harry nodded, and Hermione broke off her lecture on house-elves and turned back just in time to see the nod.

"What is it?" she asked. "Two meetings or one?"

"One meeting," Harry said, and felt Draco tighten for a moment behind him, as though he hadn't thought Harry would agree despite the nod. Harry wanted to snort at himself when he thought more about it. What proof had he given Draco that Draco could trust him? Nothing so far except refraining from hurting him some of the time and agreeing with a few of his suggestions. He'd hurt him and bullied him and dragged him into this.

Guilt might have made him freeze, but Harry shook his head and breathed through it. At the moment, until they faced the house and learned more about the ordeal, he didn't *know* what the right thing to do was, keep Draco close or send him away. The least he could do was let Draco have his choice.

“Good,” Hermione said, and moved on into the planning. Harry didn’t pay that much attention. He knew she would repeat it later, when they were all up in Gryffindor Tower and away from Draco, whom she still distrusted, but in the meantime, he had Draco to concentrate on.

And Draco wasn’t paying attention, either.

*What are you thinking?* Harry thought, not so much with distrust as with longing. *What can’t you tell me yet?*

\*

All Draco really had to do was look at Potter when they stood up from the table, and he made an excuse to stay behind his friends. Both Granger and Weasley sighed at that, but they knew they couldn’t control Potter, Draco thought. Probably no one could, not when he had the political power of his name and the magical power of the Black heir on his side.

Not that he would use either one the way it was meant to be used.

Draco waited until Granger and Weasley were out of sight, and then turned towards the dungeons. “Where is your Invisibility Cloak?” he asked, without looking at Potter.

“Up in the Tower,” Potter said. “If your sinister plan was to sneak me into the Slytherin common room, I’m afraid that it’ll have to wait.”

Draco whirled around and snarled in spite of himself. “I’m trying to *help* you, your arse! And there’s no way that your friends would agree to this. And I don’t want to listen to moral objections right now. I just want to make sure they’re not sneaking along behind us this moment.”

Potter went still, staring at him. “What did you have in mind?” he finally asked.

Draco swallowed and nodded. “I think we should get some sense of how the house’s influence affects people now who aren’t Blacks by blood and have already been affected by it. Not your friends,” he added, when Potter opened his mouth. “I wouldn’t have let them leave if I wanted to test it on them.”

Potter slowly nodded. “Who did you have in mind?”

“Snape’s portrait,” Draco said. “And it can double as asking for advice.”

Potter’s jaw clenched, but he nodded. Draco hesitated. “You’re not going to make a moral objection?” he finally asked, as Potter had started marching towards the dungeons.

“He *did* try to kill me,” Potter said. “Even if he wasn’t himself at the time. And you said that you didn’t want to listen to any.”

Draco followed Potter with a warm ember that was probably too big for the circumstances to justify it burning in his chest.

## Painted Figures

“What do you want now, Potter?”

“This is Draco’s idea,” Draco thought he heard Potter say, but if so, it was soft enough that it was hard to hear. He looked up at Professor Snape’s portrait and seemed to steel himself. Draco blinked. Did he still fear a man who was a portrait? “We wanted to see what you were like now, if you could see me the way I am or if you still want to kill me.”

Draco paused. It wouldn’t have occurred to him to be so direct, but on the other hand, he supposed Snape might still have some interesting reactions now that he knew what they were doing.

“You must forgive me, Potter,” Snape said sweetly, his voice dark enough that Draco wanted to take a step back. He didn’t, because he knew it was the best way to call Snape’s attention to him. “I was unaware that my afterlife was to be an object for your amusement.”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t think you were eager to become a murderer again, either, but that’s what happened,” Potter snapped.

For a moment, they watched each other. Professor Snape had been holding a book when they came around a corner into the isolated dungeon corridor, but he put it down now. His attention was wholly focused on Potter.

Draco swallowed, his throat bobbing. Merely being on the fringes of that attention did that to him. In fact, it made him feel startlingly similar to how he had when Potter pinned his hand to the wall and tore into his mind.

And maybe *that* got closer to some of his fantasies and the underpinnings of them than he was comfortable with. Draco shook his head and did his best to focus on what was happening in front of him.

“Say it,” Snape whispered. “Call me a murderer again.”

“I already did,” Potter said. “And what will you do if I say it a second time? Splash paint on me?”

Snape turned away, and for a second Draco thought he was going to another picture and they would lose him. He reached out to lay a warning hand on Potter’s shoulder, but Potter shrugged it off. He was focused on Snape at least as intently as Snape was focused on him.

Draco scowled. More disturbing than the thought that Snape might affect him the way Potter could was the impulse he had to scream when Potter withdrew his attention from him.

“You should know how close you are to losing certain parts of your reputation, *boy*,” Snape finally whispered. “Portraits know certain tricks. Secrets. I may not be able to touch you, but I can speak. What would the Headmaster do if he knew that you were running around as the fully recognized heir of Black?”

“Nothing, because he’s dead, too,” Potter said, with a calm that Draco thought was odd. “And I’m not fully recognized. You know that I still have to undergo the ordeal before I can be.”



“He could spread the gossip.” Snape’s eyes flashed fire in a way that would have had Draco cowering and complying immediately. He really didn’t understand what was so different about Potter that he didn’t. “He could spread it to portraits outside the school, even. Or I could do so, and then we would see what the Ministry had to say.”

“My guess is that they’d say very little,” Potter replied, quietly. “They don’t interfere with the heritage of most pure-blood families, and it sounds like having an ordeal and the house sculpt your heirs is practically normal for them. And combine it with the fact that I’m the Boy-Who-Lived and they don’t want negative publicity surrounding me anymore. No, they wouldn’t do anything.”

Snape clenched his hands. Draco caught himself wondering what it felt like when a portrait did that, if all they would sense beneath their nails was paint and canvas, instead of flesh. “You know nothing about this, about what I could do. Nothing.”

“You just told me pretty well.” Potter’s voice was cold. “Now, tell me. Do you still want to kill me? And what for?”

Snape turned to face Potter with a snap of his robes that made Draco’s stomach sink in dread. This was the way he had looked before he told Draco some home truths in the Death Eater camps they’d stayed in before Snape thought it safe to approach the Dark Lord and make excuses for Draco not being the one to kill Dumbledore.

“I always want to kill James’s hair, the bully’s face,” Snape said. “The only thing you have about you of your mother is her eyes. Never forget that.”

“And her love sacrifice,” Potter said, not flinching, still. “She was really the one who saved the world. Not me.”

Snape didn’t seem to know what to do with that, any more than Draco knew what to do with the references to Potter’s parents. His father had told him once that Snape hated James Potter, but he didn’t seem to know the details. Maybe he hadn’t cared about them, Draco thought. The knowledge made a useful tool to manipulate Snape with, and that was the only reason he had bothered to learn it.

“I worked to protect you,” Snape said. “You saw my—my Patronus. You know what she meant to me.”

“Yes, but you nearly murdered me a few days ago,” Harry said. “You would have if Draco hadn’t come by in time. I think the house’s influence made you do that. It makes sense, with what Draco told me and the fact that you never wanted to kill me before. But on the other hand, I survived the war and you didn’t, and it makes sense that you would be bitter about that. And you don’t need me to live to kill Voldemort anymore. You could have changed your mind. Did you?”

Silence. Snape breathed in and out, but Draco couldn’t hear it. What a portrait did wasn’t breathing in the classic sense, of course.

“I could have changed my mind about killing you since then,” Snape said. It didn’t sound like a question to Draco, but Potter chose to answer it as one.

“Yes,” he said. “You could. I don’t know much about portraits and what happens to them after they wake up, but you have a lot of the same memories. Did you change enough that you were willing to kill me? Or did you want to all along, and you just had to wait until the world didn’t need

me alive to fight Voldemort anymore?”

There was a silence that vibrated, at least to Draco’s nerves, like a string holding the world up. Then Snape lunged against the side of the frame and clutched it like cage bars.

“You *dare* to accuse me,” he whispered. “No, you *do* accuse me. You accuse me of wanting to kill the son Lily laid her life down for, the only thing that justified her sacrifice and was supposed to justify mine—”

Potter laughed.

The laughter froze Snape, and Draco too. It wasn’t mocking the way Draco would have expected. If anything, it sounded like Potter had just got the best news of his life. Draco eyed the back of Potter’s head and wondered if the house had unbalanced him after all, and it had just taken longer to make itself known this time.

“That was what I wanted to hear,” Potter said, when he stopped laughing. “Thank you, Professor Snape.”

“You will explain,” said Snape, with a voice that still could have pounded nails, but Draco could hear the slight tremble, the slight weakness, in it. Snape couldn’t believe that he was looking at someone who had come this far, and then said *that*.

“The house has released you from its influence,” Potter said quietly. “It did me, too. I don’t feel nearly as conflicted and dark as I did before.”

He nodded to himself, then went on, “I still want confusing things, but I think that has more to do with being under the house’s influence for a while and doing some things I regret than being under it right now. I think it’s withdrawn itself.”

“What, like a disease?” Professor Snape asked, sneering.

“No,” Potter said, and the smile dropped from his face. “Like a wave. When it comes back in, it’s going to be all the more devastating.” Then he smiled a little, again. “But I couldn’t be sure if it was mostly gone or not. It’s let you go, so I think it is. It’s waiting. Gathering its strength.”

Draco shivered. *Potter knows how to be creepy and Black even without the house’s help.*

Potter turned to Draco. “Can you arrange the meeting with your mum as soon as possible? I don’t think we have long before the house starts trying to gain control over me again.”

Draco just nodded. Potter walked away, and left Draco and Professor Snape to look at each other.

“I’m sorry,” Draco began feebly.

Professor Snape waved a hand at him. “Do not bring him here again,” he said, and Draco understood. That would be apology enough for bringing Potter in the first place.

Draco did pause, since he might never have another chance to ask, and said, “Sir, why is your portrait frame *here*? It seems so strange.”

“A backup plan of Albus’s,” said Professor Snape, his face blank. “He hoped that I might be able

to influence the course of events even if I died and someone burned my main portrait frame. The chances that anyone would find this one were remote, but the chances that it would be a student instead of a Death Eater were higher.”

Draco slowly nodded. Then he said, “I really am sorry, sir,” and walked away.

He was not sure that he wanted to hear what Professor Snape would say in response to that one, anyway.

## Narcissa

Harry closed his eyes as they stepped through the front doors of the house, and did his best not to shiver. He could feel the shadows reaching out for him, and hear the whispers of the things that crowded those shadows.

Not that he could have named them, not even to satisfy Draco, the person he most wanted to please right now. He just knew they were there, hissing and chuckling to themselves, watching him so greedily that it was hard to stand inside the door instead of turning and fleeing out of the house immediately.

“Harry?”

That was Draco, voice low and hand on his shoulder. Harry shook his head and stepped out of the way so Draco could shut the door. It was raining, and Draco didn’t want to keep his mother—who had arrived just outside the wards, as they’d agreed on two days ago—waiting in it.

Harry swallowed back the protest he wanted to make at the slimy feeling of the floor beneath his feet—which was probably all just in his head, anyway—and turned around to greet Narcissa Malfoy. She had a long, thick cloak on, but Draco took it away from her to hang it up. Then there was a little green flash next to her, and Kreacher was there, practically panting as he bowed.

“Beautiful Mistress Narcissa is giving the cloak to Kreacher,” he muttered. “He is having it dry very soon, yeses.”

Narcissa gave a smile at the house-elf that Harry would never have believed she had in her, a polite smile that would have fooled his Aunt Petunia. “Thank you, Kreacher,” she said, and held out the cloak so that it dangled and dripped off to the side. “If you give your new master as good a service as this, he has a valuable house-elf.”

Kreacher turned and let his ears droop at Harry. “Kreacher would be doings it, if Master Harry would be accepting it,” he whispered. “But he is resisting Kreacher. He is saying that he is not wanting the house.”

“That’s one of the things we’re here to discuss today,” Narcissa murmured, and if she didn’t actually reach out and pet the greasy hair on Kreacher’s head, she looked as if she would like to. “Maybe he’ll change his mind when we’re done discussing it.”

Kreacher nodded eagerly, and Draco caught Harry’s eye before he could say anything. Harry bit his lip hard. Right, this was a deception to fool Kreacher. Narcissa couldn’t want Harry to *really* take over the house, especially because that would make her and Draco his heirs and subject to the thing’s corrupting influence next.

“Kreacher is hoping for that day,” Kreacher muttered, and aimed a bow halfway between Narcissa and Harry before he vanished again.

“Please come into the drawing room, Mrs. Malfoy,” Harry muttered, aware that he had to act as host and that he had to do it with the house’s influence settling on him like a rough blanket. “Would you like something to drink? Eat?”

“Thank you, no. I ate before I came.” Narcissa walked into the drawing room before Harry could indicate the doorway. Well, of course she did, thought Harry, following her. She was experienced with this house as he couldn’t be, no matter how much time he spent here. It had belonged to her blood, and her childhood. Narcissa took a seat on an ancient couch and turned to Harry. “What can I tell you?”

Harry took a deep breath. He had hoped for such openness; he didn’t want to press and coax Draco’s mother to tell him things with Draco right there. He might use the house’s power over the Black blood again if he went in that direction.

But faced with this unexpected offer to help, without conditions, he had to grope for a moment before he could find the proper question. “What do you know about the ordeal that the house offers its heirs?”

Narcissa settled slowly against the back of the couch, looking at him. The slow, warm, sustained awareness of Draco that Harry had found himself having ever since they both walked through the door hesitated, then worked his way around the back of Harry’s chair until he stood about halfway between them.

“I don’t know much,” Narcissa said carefully. “I was not the one who went through the process of being almost chosen as the house’s heir. That was my sister. I had hoped her diary would be helpful to you.”

“It told me some things,” Harry admitted. “But it cut off from saying anything about the ordeal. I had the impression that she never underwent it. The house chose Regulus instead, because it wanted someone in the direct line, and kicked her out.”

Narcissa smiled thinly. “That would explain some of the things that Bellatrix said later in life about Regulus.”

Harry just nodded, and waited. Narcissa still wore a fringed white shawl despite having shed the cloak, and she stroked the shawl for a second, obviously contemplating her response. Harry just waited, his hands linked on his knees, and Narcissa finally nodded back and started speaking, as though his patience had won the answer from her.

“I know the ordeal left a mark. Perhaps not a scar. Not the scars that are on your throat, either,” she added to Harry, who barely kept himself from raising a hand to touch those. “And I know that the ordeal nearly killed some of the heirs. It probably *did* kill some of them, but this was not a family that liked admitting its failures. I have always wondered if some of the people blasted off the very early tapestries were heirs who had failed the ordeal, rather than ones who actually favored Muggles or whatever their other crimes were supposed to be.”

“The Blacks are sure unforgiving,” Harry muttered, thinking of all those blank and burned places on the tapestry.

Narcissa just dipped her chin a little. “All of that means that I know you are facing something grand and dangerous.” She paused, eyes closed, and then said, “I remember one other thing. There was one particular room that we liked to play in when we were children visiting my Cousin Walburga. Then one day Walburga came to us and said that we were no longer allowed to play there. That was shortly after Bellatrix had been rejected as heir for the house, although I didn’t know that at the time. Only when I found her diary and reasoned backwards did I recognize the coincidence.”

Harry was on his feet. If he actually knew where the ordeal took place, then he might be able to eliminate some of the candidates for it. "Can you show me the room?"

"Of course." Narcissa floated to her feet and led her way towards the far side of the drawing room, down a corridor that Harry knew existed but hadn't spent much time exploring. It seemed to have doors to cupboards and one narrow space draped with cobwebs that looked to have been a guest room, and nothing else.

But Narcissa halted in front of a small door Harry had thought was a cupboard, and laid her hand on the knob, looking soberly at Harry. "You have to realize that we were told to keep out years ago," she said. "Decades ago. I do not know what is in there now."

"Was it a full-sized room?" Harry asked, aware now that his throat was dry as if from dust and that Draco had drifted to a stop behind them. "Or as small as the door implies?"

"One of those rooms that are bigger on the inside than they look from the outside," Narcissa murmured. "I remember it as being large as a cavern, but I was a child. I do think it had been extended with wizardspace, if not the natural magic of the house."

Harry nodded. "Okay. I have to look in there."

To his surprise, Narcissa didn't move out of the way, just stood there looking at him with troubled eyes. "Are you sure that you should, Mr. Potter?" she asked quietly. "If this is indeed the room of the ordeal, you should not enter until you are ready to undergo it. And I do not think you are."

"He's not," Draco said from behind Harry, unexpectedly, harshly.

Harry flinched a little, but kept his face calm and stubborn and pointed towards Narcissa. "I'm not as well-prepared as I could be," he corrected them. "But I think I at least have to look. I have you here to pull me out of there if I need it."

Narcissa hesitated, Draco tensed, but in the end Narcissa did nod and step back, and Harry reached for the knob.

There was a shrill squeaking noise, and Kreacher appeared between Harry and the door, wringing his hands.

"Master is to *stop!*" he wailed.

## There Must Be No Light

Harry stared at Kreacher. Kreacher had stopped wringing his hands now, but had them clasped in front of him as if he was praying. He edged a foot towards Harry, driving him subtly backwards from the door, as if he thought Harry wouldn't notice.

Harry felt the tide of rage rising up in him, drowning some of the subtler shadows and nuances of the situation. He held it back, because it would mean torturing Kreacher again if he let it out. But it was like balancing a boulder flat on his palms, and he couldn't do it for long.

"Tell me why," he said.

For once, Kreacher didn't seem inclined to hint and riddle about things. He bowed his head and whispered, "Master Harry must be preparing to undergo the ordeal. There is being a ritual purification and cleansing. He has not been doing that yet."

Harry relaxed a little. Not that it was good news, since it would prevent him from getting a glimpse into the room unless he wanted to hurt Kreacher, but at least this confirmed it *was* the right room. And a purification and cleansing might even give them a clue to what the ordeal was, if they wanted to do a little more research before undergoing it.

"Will you help me with the cleansing?" Harry asked.

Kreacher looked up at him with such joy sparking in his eyes that Harry winced. Kreacher either didn't notice the wince or had never counted on Harry undergoing it right now, because he said eagerly, "Master Harry is making the right choice! Yes, this is Kreacher's doing. This is Kreacher's *job*. Kreacher is preparing the heirs for the ordeal from the Black family for all the years that he has served!"

Harry held back the little quiver of suspicion and irritation he had at that, and asked, "When should I begin the cleansing?" He was trying for a high, lofty, formal tone, but from the way that Kreacher studied him, as if he was a horse that Kreacher was going to prepare to sell, he wondered if it was the best thing to try and fit into the little elf's delusions.

"It must be at the dark of the moon," Kreacher said. "It will be a cloudy night, no light shining from stars. There must be no light."

Draco shivered behind him; Harry could feel it. Harry maintained his stern, distant expression, and nodded. "Of course. Should there be witnesses?"

"Master Draco and Mistress Narcissa can be witnessing it," Kreacher said, after thinking about it a bit. "No one else."

Harry was privately determined to bring Ron and Hermione along anyway, but he said nothing about that. "How long will the cleansing take?" he asked. "And the ordeal?"

"The cleansing be taking an hour," Kreacher said, bobbing his head, reading from a silent script in front of him, apparently. "The ordeal be taking the night."

Draco stiffened behind him. Harry didn't dare turn around yet, since talking too much to Draco

about what they intended to do might alert Kreacher, but he suspected Draco had come up with an idea. He only nodded again and said, "Then I should come back on the new moon night? The first night of the new moon?"

"That is when the dark be having its power." Kreacher looked at him in a way that made Harry want to flinch. It seemed to tear up all his disguises and all his plans about surviving the ordeal with help and leave him crawling in the light, helpless and exposed. "Master Harry is being ready for it?"

"I have to be," Harry said, which was the true answer no matter what he ultimately did on that night.

Kreacher nodded, and then turned and waved his hand at the door of the small room. A tracery of dark green light sprang into being on it, wavering back and forth as it grew like a vine around the knob and down to the hinges. "Then Master Harry is be leaving this room alone," he said, and urged Harry and Draco and Narcissa gently back in the direction of the kitchen. "Master Harry is not needing to go in there until the ordeal begins."

Harry cursed under his breath. They probably wouldn't be able to discuss what they had seen until later, since Kreacher seemed intent on feeding them and chaperoning them, and that meant Narcissa might have to leave. Hell, he and Draco might have to. They had sneaked out of Hogwarts easily enough, but McGonagall or another professor might ask about one of them.

Draco caught Harry's arm a second later, a tight grip just below the elbow. Harry turned his head towards him. He caught a glimpse of Kreacher watching approvingly. He probably thought it was fitting that two people who were heirs of the Black house and line had turned towards each other, Harry thought.

"I know what the ordeal is," Draco whispered. "There's only one that lasts until the dawn after the new moon."

Harry bit his lips in frustration. It was even worse to have to sit here and eat biscuits under Kreacher's watchful eye, now that he knew Draco had information he wanted to impart.

But it seemed to be what they had to do. Harry nodded heavily back and murmured, "Do what you can to keep it to yourself for now." Then he walked into the kitchen and prepared to sit down and praise Kreacher's cooking.

He saw Narcissa's eyes on him as he did. He grimaced wryly at her. She had helped, if not as much as he had thought she originally would when they invited her here. He wondered if she would manage to come back for the ordeal, or not. The first night of the new moon was a week away.

*I have to be careful.* Neither Narcissa nor Draco could help him much, not with the spells on their wands restricted to fourth-year level. Draco had managed the more complicated healing spell that had saved Harry from the poison only with the house's help and approval.

And they wouldn't have that if they were trying to interfere with the way the house thought the ordeal should play out.

\*

*Of course it would be that ordeal.*



Draco wished there was someone to praise him for the acting job he did, as he sat there eating biscuits and sipping tea and discussing his marks with his mother. The suspicion had started welling up when Kreacher talked about the cleansing and the lack of light, but he hadn't been sure until the end.

There was an ordeal that Draco's father had told him the tale of, an ordeal that involved going naked and purified into a dark cavern and coming out again at dawn. Or not coming out, either way. But it would confront the person undergoing that kind of ritual, or ordeal, with their own soul. It would make the soul into a weapon against them, Draco thought. Or it could. And that would be the point of the Black ritual, most likely. It would tear away everything that was good about the person undergoing the ordeal, the current heir.

Draco shivered.

His mother passed him a biscuit, and a stern look. To keep control of himself for right now, Draco knew. They had to get away from the watchful eyes of this house-elf before they could do anything else.

Draco controlled the shivering by casting a Warming Charm on himself. As he slid his wand away, he caught his mother's eye again.

This time, he was sure it was deliberate, and not a warning. He didn't know what she wanted, though, and just barely kept from staring at her in confusion, which would have warned the house-elf. Right now, he was muttering away happily on the other side of the kitchen, stamping back and forth and declaring that he was satisfied to anyone who would listen, but he could turn around again any second.

Narcissa looked back and forth between him and Potter, a quick pass of her eyes that Draco had to notice and interpret on his own.

When he thought he understood, he almost fell from the chair. His mother couldn't be happy about the house reaching out to them, of course, although the money passed into their vaults would help. And she wouldn't be happy about the risk to Draco from the ordeal, either.

But she might approve of him and Potter being joined together in another way--the way that Draco had thought he could appreciate being the *real* Harry Potter's consort, just not the consort of the twisted Black heir.

Potter looked over at them, and where he turned his head right now, Kreacher turned. Draco smoothed the shock from his face and picked up the next biscuit, round, made of white chocolate, with dark chocolate in the center.

"This is very good," he murmured. Kreacher relaxed and scurried off to get more of them. Potter continued looking at him.

Draco stared back, wordless. He would tell Potter everything he could about the ordeal the minute they were out of the house.

In the meantime, he wondered how to communicate to Potter, if he could, the notion that both his mother and his house-elf thought they would be good together.



## The Ordeal Named

"There. This one."

Draco's finger tapped on the page. Harry focused, reminding himself that this could be of great importance. He had to concentrate more on the words that Draco was pointing out and less on the arm and body the finger was attached to.

Of course, when he saw the way Draco moved, and when Draco had told him that he wanted to be private with Harry almost the minute they were out of the house, it was a little harder.

Then he really *saw* one of the words, and started paying more attention. The word was *cavern*. Harry wondered how in the world that was meant to correspond to the little room that Kreacher had showed them, and then warded the door of. And Narcissa had said that it was small, too, even when she was a girl and her cousin chased them out of it.

No, wait. She'd said it was large, hadn't she? Although she had said that was only because she was a little girl at the time.

But now...

*The Ordeal of the Dark takes place in a cavern, or any other large space, within walls, away from light. No light must intrude, or the moment is spoiled. The seeker, cleansed and purified as per the rite described on page 87 of this book, steps into the darkness. He must be naked, anointed with nothing but his own determination.*

Harry rolled his eyes. "You're sure?" he asked Draco over his shoulder, but it did sound like the ritual that Kreacher had described. He told himself that he hadn't asked the question merely to feel Draco respond, his breath lifting and ruffling the hair over Harry's ear.

But when he actually felt that breath, then he wasn't so sure.

"Yes, of course I'm sure," Draco snapped, and Harry shivered from the touch of warm, moist air on the side of his neck. "I know the book writes about it in a ridiculous way, but most grimoires do. You just have to put up with the ridiculousness if you want to know the content." His voice dipped a little. "And I had the impression that you did."

"Of course I do," Harry said, and turned back to the book. "I want to survive."

Hesitation and silence behind him, and Harry turned around then. They were in a dim corner of the library, behind spells that would make even Madam Pince glance away from them. Draco hadn't been able to perform those spells with the restrictions on his wand, but he'd told Harry about them, and Harry could manage them easily enough.

"What?" Harry demanded now. "You don't believe that I want to survive?"

"I only wonder who you'll survive as." Draco's eyes were wide and full of the light of the moon that wouldn't shine when Harry went into Grimmauld Place. "As yourself, or the Black heir that the house is trying to turn you into. Maybe neither if you don't pay attention to the bloody book."

Harry winced back a little, and then remembered what they were here for. Draco wasn't rejecting him, wasn't saying that he was sure Harry would die. Otherwise, he would be certain. Harry turned back to the book.

*In the dark, he will meet his soul.*

*The Ordeal of the Dark is named so because only perfect darkness can enable us to meet our souls. Only without light--the distraction, the way to turn away from what it shows because we see other things--can we acknowledge the depths of the beauty and hatred that haunt us. Only without the moon can we see what lies on the moon's dark side, and for that reason, this ordeal must take place on the first night of the new moon.*

*Only without the sun can we see what hides in plain sight, made invisible by the sun's beams. Only without the stars can we forget our imaginings and dreams about what lies in them, or beyond them. Only in darkness can we face the truth.*

*Our souls are the most pointed weapons of all, but we rarely have the power to set them free of our bodies and contend with them, or use them to wound ourselves or others. In the darkness of this ordeal, we do face them. And we do penance for all the times in the past that we have forgotten them, or turned away from them, or not set them free.*

The passage ended there. Harry turned the page, but it was only on about some sort of other ritual, and so he shoved the book away from him and turned around.

Draco stared at him, still, face pale. Harry wondered for a second if his soul would look like that, and then put the notion out of his head. For one thing, he didn't mean to go through the ordeal the way Kreacher and the book and the house wanted him to. For another, he doubted that he would *see* his soul in the darkness if he did. The book seemed very insistent that he wouldn't really *know* anything about his soul, until he came face-to-face with it.

"I wonder why we didn't see it before?" Harry asked, for lack of anything else to say.

Draco shook his head and replied smartly. "Because we weren't looking for anything with that kind of specificity. We barely knew anything." He hesitated, then added, "I did wonder if Kreacher was lying this time. But I don't think so. He wanted you to leave that door alone, and it would be a dark place. And there are too few other ordeals that have to take place on the first night of the new moon and have a purification and a cleansing first."

"What are they like?" Harry reached for the book, only now remembering that he had never read anything on page 87 the way the book had told him to.

"I don't know if it would mean anything to you." Draco grimaced a little. "Just--kind of useless, really. A bathing with water that has hyssop in it."

"Has *what*?"

"A kind of herb." Draco rolled his eyes when Harry turned and looked at him again. "I told you that it wouldn't really mean anything to you."

Harry grunted, sourly, and reached for the book again. He found the right page after some quick flipping; it seemed that someone had spilled something sticky on the pages sometime in the past, and he had trouble getting them apart without tearing the parchment. Draco stood silent beside him,

so cold that Harry was tempted to touch him and see if he was really made of marble or not.

But the pages came apart at last, and Harry bent over to read, mindful of the way that Draco's eyes fastened on his back and neck, and how he wanted to turn around and respond to that.

*The ritual cleansing consists of cold water in which hyssop has been infused. There must be white candles, a censer of pure fire, and a suspension of the stars that presided at the heir's birth.*

Harry stared at it, then turned the book so that it faced Draco. "What does *that* mean?"

Draco bent over to read it. Harry stared at the line his neck made in turn, and the shine of his hair, and wished that he knew whether he wanted Draco because that was just what he wanted, or if the house was making him want it.

"I don't know," Draco admitted, after reading it for a few minutes. He leaned back and stared hard into Harry's eyes. "I know that you have to undergo it, and that you don't really want the ordeal, but there is something good about it."

"What?" Harry's voice croaked, and he flushed a little at the way Draco's brows rose. He cleared his throat and repeated the question. "What could possibly be good about it?"

"If you face your own soul," Draco said quietly, "you might know what parts of you right now are *you*, and what parts are just the house."

*And you might know whether you really want me.*

Draco didn't say that; of course he wouldn't. But Harry felt the shimmer along his nerves. He bit his tongue, hard, still staring into Draco's eyes. Draco waited, motionless and quiet. If he thought the same thing, then it seemed he'd decided not to say it.

Harry finally nodded, abruptly, and sat back. "Then I'll at least go to the house and pretend that I'm going to undergo the ordeal so that Kreacher will give me this purification, whatever it might be. But I'll make the final decision about whether I'm really going to go into the dark and face my soul."

"That's fine," Draco said, without turning a hair. "After all, I intend to be with you. We can both face our souls at the same time."

Harry could say nothing, and he would have the same trouble finding words to tell his friends the truth when he had to explain the ordeal to them. But he reached out and took Draco's hand and held it convulsively, and Draco let him do it. For Harry, that was enough.

For the moment. And it might take the ordeal to tell him whether he wanted Draco for anything more.

## Not Leaving

"Are you sure this is the ritual, Harry?" Hermione's voice was flat as she stared down at the book Harry had brought her, the one he and Draco had found the ordeal in.

Harry nodded. He thought he would have snapped at her last week, but the retreating of the house's influence, or maybe just the knowledge of what they actually needed to do and face, had brought him a great calm. Harry suspected that calm would only last until he was actually in the ordeal room and facing his soul, but he would take what he could get.

And right now, he thought Hermione was so upset not because he and Draco had found the ritual without her help, the way Draco's scowl seemed to suggest, but because she would have wanted anything for him but something as dark as this ordeal was.

"That's it," he said. "Some things Kreacher said made us think of it." It was as close as he could come to telling her the truth without confessing the secret meeting with Narcissa to her, but she looked as though she accepted that.

Hermione made a sound like *Hew*, and stepped back, smiling at Harry a little. They were back in the library, but in an isolated corner where people were less likely to hear them talking about the ritual. "Then we should start deciding which of us get to go with you. It sounds like the cleansing and the ordeal are both private. Will Kreacher let us in?"

"That doesn't matter," Draco broke in before Harry could comment on the likelihood of Kreacher's doing anything of the sort. "I'm going into the ordeal room with him, if not to the bathing room. You and Weasley are welcome to do what you want. I'll be there."

Harry stared at Draco. His eyes were squinted shut, his jaw set. Harry wondered whether it was care for Harry himself or determination not to be the next Black heir undergoing the ordeal that made him so worked up.

He had to admit, either way it made warmth like a candle start to life inside him.

"Of course we'll be there, Malfoy." Hermione didn't seem to consider Draco's claim to be worth more than a scowl before she was turning back to Harry. "Do you have any plans to try and make yourself more ready to face the ordeal?"

Harry shook his head. "Even though we know a lot about it, how much do we *know*? I'll face my soul. That's nice. What more than that do we know? Almost nothing. I don't know how to cast spells against my soul. Maybe it's immune to them. Maybe I'll face a double of myself that's exactly like me in every way, except this one wants to be the Black heir. I don't know."

"That's all very well. But being pessimistic isn't a plan." Hermione sat forwards, ignoring Harry's attempt to tell her that he wasn't being pessimistic. "I think you ought to try and bribe Kreacher to tell."

"With what?" Harry frowned at her. "He doesn't want freedom."

"With pretending that you *do* want to go through this ritual." Hermione leaned towards him, her face so serious that Harry wanted to back off. "If you pretend to care about it and do exactly as he

tells you, then he might tell you more, so that you know what to expect.”

Harry thought about that, but Draco interrupted before he could come to any sort of conclusion. “There’s nothing you could tell him to do that would be more dangerous,” he told Hermione flatly.

“I can think of lots of things,” Hermione retorted smartly. “Like walking back into the house without any preparation and deciding that he’s going to do the ritual.”

“That won’t happen,” Harry said quietly. “Now that we know it involves soul magic, I can read more books about that. It still won’t tell me *precisely* what happens,” he added, seeing Hermione open her mouth. “But I can try.”

“And you can try to bribe Kreacher,” Hermione countered. “If he sees that you’re serious about being the Black heir, wouldn’t he be pleased enough to tell you more information?”

Harry rolled his eyes. “At this point? When I’ve objected so much and fought it so much? He’s more likely to decide that I’m lying. Let’s do this my way, Hermione. You can be there and help me, as much as you can, but we won’t know exactly what we have to fight until we get there.”

Hermione sighed and closed her eyes. “Fine. I’ll look up more about rituals on the first night of the new moon, and you do what you can about soul magic.” She glanced a little warily at Draco, as though assuming he would blow up the minute she turned her back on him. “You’ll help him?”

Draco nodded. His eyes had a distant look to them. Harry suspected he was trying to recall everything he could about soul magic, or at least everything that would be of help to them.

“Good,” Hermione muttered, but she sounded as though nothing was good about it. Then she whipped back towards Harry. “You’ll let me know if you find anything that we can work on together?”

“Of course,” Harry said. “In fact, why don’t we start right now?” He made his way towards the shelves that loomed across from their table. Those books had *something* about soul magic in them, he knew. He and Ron had once looked at them while making up shit for Divination.

When he looked back, expecting Draco to accompany him, he saw Hermione urgently whispering to Draco instead. Harry snorted. If Hermione thought she was going to change Draco’s mind about accompanying him, she was mistaken. Harry might not understand all of Draco’s motives any more than he understood his own, but he knew Draco was serious about being there when he went into the ordeal room.

*And that’s a large part of why I’m willing to do it at all.*

\*

“I have to tell you something, Malfoy.”

Draco schooled his expression. The *temptation* was to spit in Granger’s face and walk away, but he doubted that would help, either his future relationships with Harry’s friends or Harry himself. So he waited, and after a moment of muttering to herself as if she was practicing an incantation that she wanted to get right, Granger spoke.

“Do you think Harry isn’t acting like himself lately?”

Draco cocked his head slowly. “You think what he did before this ‘lately’ was more like him? Trying to force me to obey him? Obsessing over me? Acting at times like a proper Black heir and alternating that with worry?”

“I meant the last few days,” Granger said. She stood very straight, and it looked as though she had decided Draco’s tone would have no more effect on her. Draco wondered if he could rattle that resolve. “The time when he’s *thought* he was free from the house. The things he says make me wonder.”

Draco controlled the urge to roll his eyes. It seemed to him that Granger would find a way to worry about sand in the midst of a desert. “He seems normal to me. Determined to pass through the ordeal and get it over with, but you can hardly fault him for that.” He drawled the words, his eyelids lowered and gaze still fastened on Granger. “Can you?”

“Of course not.” Granger muttered something else to herself that Draco was sure was uncomplimentary and fastened her hands together. “I just—I just wonder, that’s all. I wonder.”

“Right,” Draco said, unimpressed. “Was that all you came to tell me? You should ask Weasley. I don’t know him as well as you lot.” He *thought* he kept the resentment and shouldn’t-be-there jealousy out of his voice.

Granger looked him in the eye. “No. I want you to stay with him.”

“I thought you looked a bit mental lately.”

“*Listen.*” Granger was urgent enough that Draco dropped his folded arms back to his sides. “I think you might have a better chance of actually getting into the ordeal room with him than we do, because you’re part Black. If Kreacher or something else makes us leave him, I want you to be with him.”

“You trust me to take care of him?” Draco couldn’t hide the way his eyebrows rose until they hurt.

“I trust you to bring him back.” Granger looked over her shoulder where Potter had disappeared among the shelves. “Hopefully the way he is, Harry, and not the Black heir.”

*She only trusts me because she has no choice.* Draco knew that, but—

He felt oddly honored all the same.

He found himself nodding. “I’ll do my best,” he said quietly, when Granger turned back to him with an almost desperate expression on her face.

Granger shut her eyes and nodded once, deliberately. “Thank you.”

Then she went to look for books, and Draco joined Potter. Potter kept his eyes on the tomes in front of him, but his shoulders tightened, revealing his fears, as he asked in a would-be casual tone, “What did Hermione want?”

“To make sure I would be with you,” Draco said.

Potter glanced over his shoulder, and Draco drank in the green eyes he could learn to like for their



own sake—if they would stay clear and unglazed by the possessiveness that Draco had seen in them before.

“Thank you,” Potter said at last, and took down a large book.

Draco wasn’t sure if Potter meant to thank him for telling him the truth or for staying. It didn’t matter.

“Let me see that,” he said, and ignored the way that the air between them leaped when Potter handed him the book and their fingers brushed.

## A Bath in Hyssop

“Master Harry is being welcome to the house.”

Harry took a deep breath and stepped inside the house, handing his cloak to Kreacher. Behind him followed Draco, openly because he could, and then Ron and Hermione under the Invisibility Cloak. Now that Harry knew it was one of the Deathly Hallows, he was more willing to trust that it would actually help protect them against anything that might happen to them. “Thank you, Kreacher,” he said formally, and watched the elf hang his cloak up before he turned back to him. There was a depth in Kreacher’s eyes, a darkness, that he had never witnessed before. “It’s time for the ritual bath.”

“The *cleansing*,” said Kreacher, as though the distinction was important. Maybe it was. Nothing Harry had read in the last week had given him that impression, but then again, nothing he had read had actually told him more about the ordeal than they already knew. Kreacher glanced at Draco, and hesitated.

“I’d like him there,” Harry said quietly. “For as much as he can be.”

Kreacher, as he’d expected, fussed and fidgeted, and wrung his hands a bit. Then he paused, and smiled. “Master Draco Malfoy can be being there because he is Black and Master Harry’s heir,” he said, and then lowered his voice. “But there is being one more condition.”

It took Harry a minute to realize what Kreacher was on about, but something else on page 87 of that book finally came back into his head. “Someone needs three strong reasons to attend a cleansing like this?” he finally hazarded. The book had given an example of those reasons as being a brother of the person cleansed, needing to help him because the heir was blind, and being a strong protector in a time of war. A man who fulfilled all three of those conditions had been allowed to attend a cleansing some time in the last century.

Kreacher bobbed his head and looked back and forth between them. Harry exchanged a baffled glance with Draco. Other than Draco’s Black blood and him being Harry’s heir, what third rule *could* exist that would permit him to attend the cleansing?

Then Harry realized the gaze was only baffled on his end. Draco moved forwards and stood staring down at Kreacher. Kreacher, meanwhile, tilted his head back and seemed utterly, quietly convinced that Draco would say the right thing.

“Yes, Kreacher,” Draco whispered. “I am Harry’s consort.”

Harry started to open his mouth. He was torn between saying that Draco didn’t have to do that just to get entrance to the bathing room, and also that if *that* had happened, he would have remembered it.

But then he heard an outburst behind him, quickly muffled, and spun around, letting his hand drop to his wand. Ron or Hermione, whoever it was, had muffled themselves, though. There was no disturbance there to tell him where the Invisibility Cloak was, and Harry let his hand fall to his side with a little exclamation of relief.

“Master is being followed,” Kreacher said, and went over to shut the door of the house

deliberately. That still closed Ron and Hermione inside, though, and he gave no sign of noticing them. “The cleansing ritual is private to Master and Master’s consort.”

Harry stared at Draco again. He was taut, it looked like, every muscle outlined against his skin. In the end, Harry shook his head and let it go. Draco had probably only said it to make sure that they both got into the bathing room, and Harry had to have Draco with him.

Had to. In a way that went beyond the mere requirements of hoping to survive, and into something that felt as fundamental as flesh and blood.

Kreacher bowed his head to both of them and gestured down the corridor. “Master Harry and his consort be following. The bathing chamber is this way.”

\*

Draco hadn’t made a decision about what would happen when he had to witness this part of the cleansing. Or maybe he had, and making the decision in the first place was—what necessitated everything else that followed.

Either way, he didn’t turn away when Kreacher began to take Harry’s clothes off.

Harry stood, arms extended, in the middle of the bathing room, which had turned out to be buried down a corridor Draco had thought held only storage rooms. It was made of grey stone, very subtly heated by a charm beneath the floor. In the center was a shining pool, water alight with white fire that also seemed to dance beneath the surface. And there were hooks on the walls, and shelves, and a steaming jar of unguent, and Kreacher moving in a circle around Harry, taking his clothes off.

Harry was the most beautiful thing there.

Draco hadn’t expected to think that. Maybe that Harry was handsome, or hard, or committed to defending himself. But no, he hadn’t expected to look at that scarred skin and those scrawny shoulders and the way Harry breathed nervously in and out, and think *beauty*.

Yet he was. And from the way Harry kept darting little glances at him, glances that flickered like flames and left comparable trails of heat behind, Draco thought his regard might be returned.

*At the very least, he’s has to be curious about why I decided to claim that I’m his consort.*

He became aware that Kreacher had stopped undressing Harry and was looking at him patiently. Draco licked his lips and regarded the house-elf, trying not to feel ill at the gleam of understanding in those eyes. Well, he supposed it was better than Kreacher deciding that Draco’s lust was for *him*.

“Master Draco Malfoy would like to be assisting Master Harry Black to be getting into the water?” Kreacher asked, inclining his head.

Draco stepped forwards before he had thought enough to know that a refusal would have been possible. Of course he was going to leap at a chance like that, the way he was feeling now. His fingers skimmed down Harry’s shoulders and ended up on his right arm, while Kreacher took his left. Together, they guided Harry towards that pool where the white light flickered. It was a cold bath, Draco knew, but the light made it seem warm.

Harry closed his eyes and bowed his head when he reached the rim of the pool. Draco hesitated, wondering if he had changed his mind about going through with the cleansing. It was true that they hadn't worked out a way to survive the soul ritual. Some things that might help, but not a way to survive it.

Then Harry shivered once, in a way that Draco thought had little to do with the cold wind almost rising off the pool, and stepped into the water.

Draco let his arm down gently, and watched as Harry waded out into the middle of the cold, hyssop-infused water and extended his arms again. Kreacher snapped his fingers, and a small bridge extended from the stone rim over the pool. He was on it in seconds, bending down, rubbing a kind of rough soap into Harry's skin and encouraging him in little murmurs.

Or, at least, Draco assumed the murmurs were encouraging. Of course, knowing Kreacher, they could be about murdering someone in a particularly fitting way.

Draco touched one hand to his groin, because he had to, and then pulled it back and watched, trying not to do anything else that would embarrass him beyond bearing.

\*

"Master Harry is doing well...Master Harry is being a true Black...Master Harry is being in the water..."

Kreacher was muttering that and all sorts of other things, but Harry found that he wasn't interested in listening to them. He was looking at Draco instead, and he had seen the little darting motion of Draco's hand towards his groin.

For that matter, Harry thought he would have needed that himself if the water around him at the moment hadn't been so bloody cold.

They might never know the truth of their feelings until after the ordeal, and perhaps then they would cool like this water and draw them apart. But Harry told himself he would remember at least two things. He was *determined* to remember them.

He would remember that Draco had claimed to be his consort willingly. And he would remember that they had at least liked each other physically.

By the time Kreacher helped him out of the pool and wrapped a silver chain around his neck and a towel around his waist, Draco was looking elsewhere, and Harry had had time to start worrying about whether Ron and Hermione had managed to sneak into the bathing room, and what they would think if they did. But his eyes were still on Draco, the lingering flush in Draco's cheeks and the way he turned around to return Harry's stare a second later, and that was where he wanted them to stay.

*Maybe where I want them to stay for a long, long time.*

## Before the Ordeal

“The room is being this way.”

Kreacher seemed to have forgotten that he had already showed Harry the way to the room once before, or perhaps this was part of the ritual and he had to say it whether or not it was needed, Harry thought. He certainly had his arm gravely stuck out in front of him, pointing towards the corridor they had entered last week. Harry took one slow breath, conscious of his nakedness other than the necklace and the towel around his waist, and of Draco at his side. He didn't know where Ron or Hermione were.

He was becoming slowly sure, the certainty rising in him like a dark tide, that he couldn't worry about them. He couldn't worry about Draco either, if it came to that, but Kreacher had let Draco stay openly at his side so far and might even let him into the ordeal room, for all Harry knew. He had to go ahead, he had to push forwards, and let other things—like what it would be like to face his soul—take care of themselves.

Draco's hand cut into his left shoulder. Harry turned around, only to have Draco tense at the sight of his face. Harry sighed a little. He supposed he might have been staring ahead, as if asleep. He thought he could feel sleep, or peace, pulling at the edges of his eyelids now.

“Well?” Harry whispered. Kreacher had halted and was looking back and forth between him and Draco, but didn't seem inclined to hurry him. Well, Harry thought, it was only a little after nine. If the ordeal was supposed to last until dawn, they had plenty of time.

Draco swallowed, and then picked up such a commanding presence that Harry stared. Had Draco been able to do that all this time? He *should* do it more often, Harry thought, as he felt a stirring under his towel. It made Draco devastatingly attractive.

“Wait up the corridor for us, Kreacher, please,” Draco said, and inclined his head slowly so that his hair fell around his ears like a silken shroud. “There is something I need to talk to the Heir of Black about.”

Kreacher bowed. “Kreacher is obeying the Heir of Malfoy and the Heir of Black,” he said, and vanished. He appeared by the door of the bathing room, his back turned to them. Harry wondered if it would really keep him from overhearing anything that they chanced to say.

If Draco was worried about that, he didn't show it. He whipped around at once instead, and pressed Harry's shoulders up against the wall.

Harry raised his hands and locked them on Draco's wrists, but didn't try to pull them away. “We could have done this a month ago,” he murmured. “I would have been agreeable *then*.”

Draco didn't smile. Instead, his eyes searched Harry's intently, and then he shook his head. “You can't feel it,” he whispered.

“Feel *what*?” Harry tugged on his wrist, wanting it back now, if Draco was going to be stupid.

“The spell this place is casting over you,” Draco hissed, close to his ear. “You look like the perfect little sacrifice walking to his death. You *can't* do that.”

“Of course I can’t do that,” Harry snapped, feeling a flame awaken in him for the first time in what felt like hours, although he didn’t think his cold bath had lasted more than fifteen minutes. “I already did that once, when I walked to my death in the Forbidden Forest. It’s not going to happen again.”

“Thank Merlin you have that much sense left to you,” Draco muttered, and then shook his head. “But your expression...it was the same.”

“You didn’t *see* me walking to my death, so how do you know what I looked like then?” Harry asked.

Draco took a breath as though praying for patience, and then leaned in and set his mouth against Harry’s ear. Harry immediately shivered and tilted his head back, losing any sense of his surroundings—at least until Draco gripped his shoulder and shook him.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Draco hissed into his ear. “You’re surrendering to the sense of the house, the way it’s inducing you to almost look forward to the ordeal. Then at least it will be over, right? And we’ll know what we feel about each other, when we’ve been uncertain before?”

Harry stared at Draco with wide eyes, wondering how he could know so well what Harry felt. Was the house reaching out to him in the same way, since he was Harry’s heir now? Had Harry trapped him, and maybe Narcissa, in something that he should never have started?

Draco shook him again. “*Focus*,” he ordered, still with that commanding aura around him. “Have you been feeling those things?”

Harry swallowed once. “Yes,” he whispered. “I don’t think—it wouldn’t be as bad as what you’re saying, Draco. We researched and we tried, and we just couldn’t find out more than we already found. It was great to even find that much, to come that far. Isn’t that what you were saying, the last time we discussed the ordeal?”

Draco’s hands tightened on him again, which Harry hadn’t known was even possible; he hadn’t thought there was that much give left in his skin. “Listen to me,” Draco hissed. “We *have* to make sure that we don’t just walk in there and wait for something to happen to us.”

Harry steeled himself against the lethargy and the thoughts of Draco that wanted to wash over him once more, and nodded. “Okay,” he said. “What would you suggest?”

\*

Draco knew one thing he could do. The problem was, he had never heard of it before that he remembered, and he couldn’t be sure if it was his pure-blood upbringing or something he didn’t remember reading that had told him what to do, or—

Or the house, influencing him, trying to ensnare two prey for the price of one.

Either way, he was the leader of this little expedition right now, and he had to do what he thought best. He reached out and drew his wand. He thought he saw the little house-elf tense from the back, but he didn’t appear between them or try to stop them, and that was all Draco could hope for right now.

“We make a bargain,” Draco said. “Here and now. A blood bargain.”

“Not a vow?” Harry’s gaze went back and forth between Draco’s wand and Draco’s face.

Draco nodded. “Not a vow. Just a bargain. The blood and the magic help us keep it, though. If we see one of us falling asleep, then we’ll wake him up. All right? I see you drooping and surrendering, I’ll tell you. And you do the same thing for me.” He thought it was the best solution, indeed, as he watched the way Harry’s eyes took fire. Yes, he would do for someone else what he might neglect to do for himself.

“All right.” Harry held his palm out, flat.

Draco lightly scored the wand along it, opening a line of blood there with a quickly muttered charm. Then he held the wand up, twirled it once to send the blood scattering onto his face, and brought his hand sharply down on the tip. It flared with light, and power rose up his arm and to his shoulder, then stabbed down after that to the heart.

“I make the bargain to wake you up if I see you fading,” Draco whispered harshly. He had no idea if there were more formal words, since he had no idea where the bargain had come from in the first place, but this would do, he thought, as the blood chilled and glowed on the tip of the wand, and what he had scattered on his face became incredibly hot and tight, creating lines that ran from his forehead around his eyes. “Do you make the same for me?”

Harry nodded, the motion of his head as heavy as his eyes and the gaze he rested on Draco.

Draco waited a moment, then prompted, “It needs words.”

Harry jumped and reached out, resting one hand on Draco’s blood-encrusted face, although he didn’t need to. “I make the bargain to wake you up if I see you fading,” he whispered, and words that had sounded normal in Draco’s voice sounded husky and exotic in his. Then he drew Draco’s face closer, and added, “I would do anything for you, Draco.”

Their kiss had blood in it. Draco leaned nearer, bearing Harry backwards, but aware, from the iron grip Harry’s hand had on his face, that he was not the only one in control here. They broke apart slowly, and Draco leaned near to put his own hand on Harry’s jaw and close his eyes.

It was harder than it should have been to pull back from that, to summon Kreacher and continue the walk to the room of the ordeal. But at least Draco thought that he knew a little bit more about his own feelings now.

## Darkness

“Master Harry is going to the ordeal.”

For once, Kreacher’s way of phrasing things didn’t sound silly or squeaky. It sounded ominous. Harry shivered a little and wondered if it was from his nakedness, the thought of the ordeal, or the growing possibility, from the way Kreacher stood in front of the door to the little room with his arms spread across it, that he wouldn’t allow Draco to accompany Harry inside.

“Master Harry is going to be becoming a true Black.” Kreacher eyed Harry, as if searching for something in the shape of his ears or nose that would prevent him from achieving his goal. He seemed to see positive things instead, because he grunted and continued, “Master Harry is not receiving any help from outside the room once he is inside.”

Harry nodded, although his throat felt full of satin. He felt Draco lean close behind him, one arm falling across his shoulders as if that would help him survive this. Well, it might. Harry managed not to snuggle into the arm, and only nodded again when Kreacher watched him as though waiting for a more detailed response.

Kreacher sighed and turned to remove the green ward he had put on the door. Draco leaned even closer and breathed into Harry’s ear, “Follow my lead. Don’t act surprised by anything I do. We have to do this as quickly as we can.”

Harry blinked at him, then nodded once when Draco gave him a warning look. Draco turned to Kreacher and smiled at him. Kreacher smiled back against, it seemed, his better judgment. “Master Draco Malfoy cannot be accompanying Master Harry,” he said, holding up his hand. “His consort is being staying outside with the rest.”

“The rest” made Harry wonder if he knew about the Invisibility Cloak and Ron and Hermione after all, but now wasn’t the time to worry about it. Either way, Harry highly suspected his friends wouldn’t be coming into the ordeal room with him. Draco stood there, though, his arm as tight as a chin, and nodded and murmured and lied well enough to fool Kreacher, who stopped watching them a moment later. He turned back to the ordeal room door and stretched his arms so wide that it seemed as if he would gather everything that was in the room, or might be, into them.

“The ordeal is opening,” he whispered.

The last gleams of the green ward faded. The small wooden door creaked open. Harry took a step forwards, but Draco’s arm on his shoulders restrained him. Harry managed to keep his impatient huff to himself as he turned around. Yes, Draco knew what he was doing. Harry would keep that in mind.

Draco leaned forwards and kissed him.

This kiss was even more impatient and forceful than the one they had shared in the corridor, and made Harry’s skin prickle and speed with tingles. He shook, he shivered, he wrapped his hands around Draco’s shoulders in turn and almost bit his lower lip off as he sucked on it. Draco chuckled at him, and Harry could see from the corner of his eye that Kreacher was watching them indulgently.



Then Draco spun him to the side as if they were dancing, and past Kreacher, and into the ordeal room.

The door slammed shut behind them.

There was a shriek, and Harry heard what sounded like a rat trying to get through the door. He spun around, his throat tight, and then realized it was Kreacher, scrabbling at the door from the other side.

Harry expected him to shout something, at least Harry's name, but instead, there was silence. And Harry couldn't see the line of light under the door or around the edges, he realized, although it had been an ill-fitting door and he should have been able to see *something* against the absolute darkness of the ordeal room, whether the outside corridor was dim or not.

And there was something about the room...

Harry turned around, straining his eyes instinctively, although he already knew that he would see nothing but the absolute darkness required for the ritual. There was a little sound, though. The sound of echoes bouncing back from walls that had to be a little bigger than the door to the room had indicated.

Or a *lot* bigger.

Harry reached down, crouched down, and touched the rough stone of the floor. It felt completely unworked, not as if it had been made to fit a house. He was shaking as he stood back up, and felt the cold currents moving around him.

"Draco?" he whispered, and flinched at the echoes.

"I'm here." Draco embraced him from behind, but even his skin felt colder than it should have. Harry tried to tell himself that it was just the dark unhinging him, making him jump. He should be used to this. He had spent a lot of time in his dark cupboard when he was a child, after all.

But this was deeper. This was worse. This was absolute silence outside their little circle of breathing and moving, while at Privet Drive he had always been able to hear the Dursleys shouting and watching telly and eating and thumping up and down the stairs. They might have shut out the world when they had come into this cavern.

*Or stepped into a different one*, Harry thought, and slowly slid Draco's arms from around his waist, reaching out into the dark with one hand. Nothing met him except coolness and darkness.

And one other thing, distant, far away.

Harry listened intently to the slow, regular sounds. At first he thought they sounded like rain falling on a roof, and then stones dropping, and then, when they were very close, he recognized them. The noises of clawed feet busily clicking along. They moved faster as they neared him, too.

Harry drew back against Draco. Draco cradled him close, shivering—or trembling. The footsteps never stopped until they were possibly a few inches away. Then the cessation of sound made Harry shake again.

Foul breath stroked his face.

And he could see. The darkness had not lessened, but outlines formed from it, fainting, fleet silver lines that stroked together a picture, and Harry made out what stood on all fours in front of him.

He knew at once it was an image of his soul. And an uglier thing, he'd never imagined. It resembled Remus's werewolf form, but its fur stuck out in every direction, or clumped and fell out of its skin, afflicted with what looked like mange and itch both at once. Its teeth projected wildly from its jaws, and it couldn't close them, so a constant stream of drool worked its way over its muzzle. The eyes were huge, and staring, and mad. The nails that Harry had heard tapping over the floor were the only well-shaped things about the beast, and even then, they were so huge and black and sharp, crusted with blood and filth, that Harry flinched back from it.

The worst part was, he recognized it.

The way it hunched and rocked was the way his envy of Ron's family and the way that Hermione always knew the right thing to do moved. He'd felt those emotions creeping through his heart when he thought about his best friends, sometimes, and he flinched miserably from the knowledge of how it had affected his soul.

Its teeth were made of hatred, the gnawing hatred that had swallowed him up when he thought about Voldemort and the Death Eaters, especially Bellatrix Lestrange. Maybe at the very end of the war, he'd gone to his death for noble motives, but he'd wanted to defeat them. He'd wanted to use an Unforgivable on Bellatrix. He'd fallen asleep after Sirius's death to dreams of her being torn apart, and him laughing.

The eyes were the staring madness that had sometimes overcome him at the Dursleys'. He'd lain in his cupboard, with thoughts of what he had done that made them not love him, and the presents Dudley got, and the *attention* Dudley got, and the fact that he'd done nothing and they just hated him, and the unfairness of it all, swirling around inside him until he felt as if he would fling himself off a cliff if one was there, just to stop the chaos. There was no escape, and there was no rest. That was what the eyes of the beast were like.

And the filth on the creature's nails was the filth he'd dipped his hands in. Murder, the corrupt ritual Voldemort had used to bring himself back to life, witnessing death, the Elder Wand, basilisk venom, Parseltongue, and most of all, the Horcrux. He had thought himself purged of the darkness, but it was lying in wait inside him. It was no wonder the Black house had been able to bring it so effortlessly to life. It was there, tarnishing his soul, dipping it in slime.

The beast came closer—the beast that was him, made of all the worst parts of him—and opened its mouth, unhinging its jaws like a snake, the better to swallow him.

Harry began to scream, and he could not stop screaming.

## The Dark Tide

Draco stared into the darkness. He knew something must be there, because Harry's body almost convulsed in Draco's arms from his screams, and he wasn't the sort to start screaming about nothing. But all Draco could see was the same thick, satiny blackness that had carpeted his eyes from the moment they came in here.

Draco wasn't stupid. He knew the darkness was unnatural, and that the description of the ordeal in the book promised true danger. How could he help if he couldn't *see* anything, though?

And why hadn't the room tried to confront him with an image of his own soul yet?

Draco dug his hands into Harry's shoulders, trying to cut through the screams and give Harry something that would ground and steady him, something unlike the terrible vision that he must see—however he saw it. "Harry, Harry," he whispered into his ear. "Can you hear me? You're still alive, and I'm still here. Whatever it is, it hasn't torn me apart. Can you *hear* me? I can't see anything!"

There was a long, sliding whine from Harry's throat, and then he did manage to choke off the sound. He reached up and scratched at Draco's arm. Draco winced, but didn't pull back. For all he knew, that might take the one fragile anchor that was still holding Harry to sanity with it.

"Can't you *see* it?" Harry whispered, in such true agony that Draco clutched him closer without exactly meaning to. "Can't you—it's here." He ducked his head, flinching, and tried to curl up against Draco. Draco cradled him, listening as intently as he could. He had thought for a second there was a snarl, or a wash of fetid breath over his face, but if that was really Harry's soul, it seemed to have decided against showing itself any further.

"Nothing is happening to me," he whispered into Harry's ear. "That's good. I like that. It means that I'm more ready to help you." He hesitated, his mind working furiously, darting over the notes in the book, the only source of information they had found. Yes, Kreacher had talked about the ordeal, too, but it wasn't like they could really trust Kreacher.

The book hadn't said anything about the ritual bathing being for *protection*, had it? It had talked about purification and cleansing, and that was it.

Draco swallowed. He was suddenly sure what had happened, and it made all the more sense when combined with the way that the house's influence had retreated, or seemingly retreated, from Harry in the last few weeks.

"I think the cleansing was a stripping of the defenses you had," he whispered into Harry's ear. Harry tensed against him, but didn't move away. "Think about it. Why would facing their souls make the Blacks fit heirs?"

It took forever for Harry to make his mouth respond, but his voice answered Draco in level, if sluggish, tones. "Because—because it drove them mad, and the house wants mad heirs."

"It doesn't want them if they're completely insane," Draco disagreed. "They have to be sane enough to know when it's appropriate not to use Dark Arts, and to know what's best for the house." It was a hard task to keep his voice level, especially because he knew that Harry was

starting to shake again. “But I see what you mean,” he added quickly. “But—think about this. Why would showing them their souls accomplish that?”

A wild laugh bubbled in the back of Harry’s throat; Draco could actually feel it happening against his hand. “If you could see what I see, you wouldn’t ask that,” he whispered.

Draco took a deep breath. They had made a bargain to wake each other up, and although he didn’t really want to hear what Harry saw, he thought this was the only way he could keep that bargain. “Describe it to me.”

Harry froze and tilted his head back. Draco felt his head move, at least, but it was of course impossible to see anything in the stupid inky blackness. Draco bit his lip savagely and managed to stand still, although he wanted to retreat more than anything.

“You don’t want me to,” Harry whispered. “I care for you, and I won’t.”

“If you cared for me, you would fulfill my requests, and give me something other than the title of your consort,” Draco muttered back at him. “Come *on*, Harry. Are you going to do what I want or not?”

\*

Harry felt as though the floor was tilting under him. And maybe it was. It wasn’t like he could see it.

He *could* see his soul, right in front of him, wheezing breath that now smelled like a twisted version of Amortentia across his chin. And that made him remember the disappointment he had given Ginny, when he broke up with her, and then didn’t get back together with her again this year. He was a horrible person. Who knew what hurt he might have caused, that he didn’t even know about? Hurt that came from him being famous and other people wanting the fame, like Ron—

“Harry!”

His head snapped sideways as Draco shouted that in his ear. He staggered, but when he opened his eyes, his soul was still right in front of him, drooling and snarling. It never seemed to alter its position no matter how his own changed. Harry understood, dully, what that meant. It was telling him that he couldn’t run, that it would be right there until he accepted it.

“What?” he whispered, because he had to answer Draco, but it was impossible to turn his head.

“Listen to me,” Draco said. “I want that description, and I want it *now*.” He paused, and Harry thought the pause was strange, but then Draco’s words drove into him, and he forgot about it. “You dragged me into danger, you know. Giving me and my mother the money and the title of Black heir just means that I’ll have to face this next, if you fail.”

Harry closed his eyes. That didn’t diminish the vision of the beast, but it *did* hurt. And although he didn’t know why Draco would want to share this vision and have that nightmare in his memory, too, Harry had to do his best to oblige him. He had already fucked up Draco’s life enough, dragging him in here.

“I—I see a beast that looks a little like a werewolf,” Harry whispered. And he did see it. He would always see it, now. He half-thought that he would spend the rest of his life in the ordeal room, in

the darkness, with Draco breathing impatiently in his ear and the beast whooshing into his face. “But not as hunched. Its teeth stick out, and its eyes have all the mad thoughts I ever had.”

“I didn’t know you were crazy before this house claimed you, Potter.” Draco’s arms tightened around him.

Harry tried to draw away. The name was another mark of how he had failed Draco. If his friendship had been real, if he hadn’t failed, then Draco would actually address him by his name.

But Draco sighed a second later, muttered something, and said, “I’m sorry, Harry. Can you explain?”

Harry took a deep breath, and tried to say, “I had—thoughts. I hated my relatives. I thought about torturing Bellatrix Lestrange. I had a piece of Voldemort’s *soul* inside me.” He felt Draco stiffen even further, but he was in the middle of the fucked-up explanation now, and knew he wouldn’t be able to stop it early, even if Draco asked him questions. “I fought a basilisk. It poured venom into me. I was killing ghosts before I was thirteen years old. I nearly died so many times. It’s all over me, the filth.”

Silence. Harry thought for a second Draco would unwind his arms from his waist and walk away now that he knew how evil Harry was. He wasn’t even supposed to be in the ordeal room. He would probably find his way out without trouble.

And then Harry would be left alone with the beast, and he *would* go mad.

“I was right,” Draco murmured, and then he raised his voice. “You’re being left vulnerable to seeing the worst parts of yourself. That was what the bathing was all about. Not protecting you. Washing you clean—of your sanity, of the ability to think the best about yourself. It leaves you *exposed* to the ordeal. The house let you go. No wonder. It knew that it would reclaim control of you here.”

Harry shook his head. He knew Draco would feel the motion, and so he whispered, “Then—you don’t think that this is real?”

“I think that your reaction to it is less sane than it would be if you hadn’t been through that bathing,” Draco said, his voice steady. “And here’s the proof: I’m here in the same room, and I see the darkness, but I don’t see your soul.”

Harry drew breath to reply—

In the seconds before his soul snarled, choking and hateful, and leaped at Draco across his head.

## The Edge of the Blade

Draco was aware that something was coming. The way Harry went stiff in his arms and then screamed was too obvious.

But he didn't expect whatever it was to actually bear him to the floor. He flailed with his arms, and hit something. But he also lost track of Harry, and although nothing clawed him apart or tore his throat out in the next few seconds, the way he had thought would happen from Harry's description of his soul, he didn't know where he was.

Draco took a deep breath and fumbled for his wand. He should have thought to do that before. But to be fair, he had been occupied in comforting Harry and hadn't thought about whether he could use magic at all. In the ordeal room, magic itself might prevent him.

He tried to cast *Lumos*. The light blazed for a second, and then darkness ate it. That was enough time for Draco to see the enormous size of the room they stood in, and the faint lines between the heavy flagstones that made up the floor. But it didn't do him any good otherwise, he thought, as he stood up and grimaced, rubbing the back of his head where it had collided with the floor.

"Harry?" he whisper-called. He meant to make his voice louder, he really did, but the darkness ate the noise, too. Draco shook his head, told himself he was probably imagining that, and called again. "Harry!"

No response. Then a quick shuffle off to the side, which made Draco spin in that direction and aim his wand. But the sound didn't repeat, and he wondered if it had been the sound of Harry crawling away from him and he ought to go after it.

Not easy to make himself move, once his feet had found a position they liked. Draco shivered and called, as boldly as he dared, "Harry!"

Silence, and then a quick skitter off to the side. This time, Draco *forced* himself to spin around and aim his wand. Another *Lumos* Charm might at least show him whether it was Harry, or his soul, or just his imagination.

This time, his wand wouldn't light. Draco cursed and shook it, and the shuffle came again, off to the side, followed by a clink. Draco thought it might be the clink of the silver chain that Kreacher had wrapped around Harry's neck, the chain that Draco still didn't know the purpose of. He tried to hush his breathing and listen as hard as he could.

A muffled whimper. Draco winced, picturing how terrified Harry would be, now that he thought Draco had left him. He cupped his hands around his mouth, this time determined to make his voice carry.

"Harry? I'm all right. I just want to know where you are." He thought he did well, combining compassion with gentle command. "I want you to come back and tell me how you are. Are you hurt? Is there some healing spell I need to cast?" He thought the ordeal's magic might permit that, as long as Draco didn't try to see. But that was okay. He could trace his hands and his wand all over Harry's body to find the wound, if necessary.

Even here, even now, he felt a responsive twitch in his groin at the thought, and had to fight back a

smile.

Another sound, off to the right—or what might be the right. It was so hard to tell in a dark room like this. Draco held his breath, then let it out again and began to breathe as loudly as he could. That might be a way of guiding Harry to him, if nothing else would work.

“Harry?” he called. He began to repeat the name at five-second intervals, as carefully as he could, as cheerfully as he could, hoping that whatever Harry’s hyssop-addled brain might be seeing now, he would find his way back.

\*

His soul had vanished into the darkness. Draco had vanished.

Harry wrapped his arms around himself and shivered. He was so cold. Of course, he was naked, so it was to be expected, but it still seemed strange that he had never noticed how cold he was before now.

*Unless something didn’t want me to notice it.*

Despair curled around Harry like the links of the chain around his neck. Draco had said that the bath had altered the way Harry saw things, that the house was warping his judgment. If that was the case, how could Harry know that *anything* he heard or saw was real? Not that he could see anything in the darkness, anyway.

But he had been able to see his soul, until it rushed over him and Harry lost track of it—and Draco, which was more important.

He twisted in the middle of the stone floor, and dared to raise his voice a few times. Each time, the sound faded. Harry swallowed. He wished he’d had more to drink, perhaps even drinking the stupid water in the cold bath. It wouldn’t have poisoned him, he was sure—Kreacher and the house wanted a living heir—and it might have benefited him now.

Then he began to hear his name being called. The sound bounced from walls that had to be further away than they sounded like, at least if the ordeal was really taking place in the cavern that the book said it should, and the room had transformed.

“*Harry.*”

The voice was thick and low and loathsome, and Harry knew it at once. It was the voice of his soul. It sounded the way that that horrid beast would speak if it could, choking through shreds of rotten flesh in its throat.

It repeated his name every five seconds or so. Harry swallowed slowly. Perhaps it held Draco captive under its paws, and that was why it wanted him to come to it.

If he could find it, he might be able to kill it. And wasn’t that what he should do, anyway? Reject, kill, all the darkest parts of himself? The house might not want him anymore if he managed to do that.

He might kill the part of himself that had tortured Kreacher. More to the point, he might kill the part that had thought it was funny to hurt Draco and bend him to his will.

He stood up, holding the chain around his neck so it wouldn't clink, and began to move slowly closer to the voice. He wondered for a moment what he could use to kill it; he thought Kreacher had taken his wand when he took the bath.

And then, no, he found it, his hand groping at his side for a moment before he touched it. He wondered if the ordeal had given it back to him, if that had been what the house wanted him to do all along. Use magic in the ordeal. It had probably thought that he was going to kill something else, though, and not the dark parts of his soul. Maybe the light parts of it.

Harry smiled, and knew that his lips were cracking and bleeding around the expression. Well, that didn't matter. As long as he got to use his wand the way it should be used.

The voice was still calling out. It hadn't changed. The speaker didn't sound as though it was moving from his place. Harry still edged forwards. He did wonder why he couldn't see his soul, the way he had been able to before, but the realization didn't bother him greatly. He was on the verge of killing his soul instead of falling into the house's hypnosis of him. That had to change things.

When he thought it was time, he turned to face the speaker, lofting his wand. The voice fell suddenly silent, but that didn't matter. Harry knew where it was now, and he knew exactly the kind of spell he had to cast. The only spell that had no defense and no block.

He wondered for a moment if he would tear his soul if he cast the Killing Curse, and then snorted. He was the only one on the planet who would worry about tearing his soul as he labored to kill part of it.

He aimed his wand slowly forwards, hand shaking not with fear but with the intensity of making sure that he had it right. He would only get one shot, he thought. His soul had pounced at Draco and driven him away from Harry. If Harry only wounded the creature now, it would probably seek Draco out and kill him.

*That can't happen.*

Harry shuddered, and the shudder traveled up his arm to his shoulder and made his arm vibrate. He bit his lip and forced his wand steady again. He wanted Draco. He didn't want him dead. He had to have him with him. Any other option was unacceptable.

*But if I can't have him with me right now, I can have his voice.*

And Draco had said that he couldn't really trust his perceptions, that the cleansing had tried to strip away Harry's sanity. That Harry's soul didn't really look like that, and they weren't horrible, Harry *or* his soul.

Which meant...

*How do I know that the person speaking my name is my soul? How do I know that its voice sounds like that?*

Harry stood there, shaking, in agony, and heard the thing or person in front of him, whichever it was, begin to move in his direction.



And he wavered, because he wanted to protect Draco more than anything, which meant striking at his soul, but he also wanted to *trust* Draco, and Draco was the one who had reminded him that he could trust nothing here, no perception, no sensation, that the house would do anything to gain control of him.

He wavered, and the moments passed, and the creature came closer, and he knew that he had moments, perhaps, to make a decision, one that could easily damn him either way.

## The Trusting Moment

Draco stood there with his hands groping out. Then he took another tentative step. By now, he was certain he had heard something, and because he had never been touched by Harry's soul, it had to be Harry himself.

His breathing was fast enough to shake his chest, his skin so sweat-soaked that he couldn't have held his wand. It was back in its place at his side, and he still groped and cast forwards. If Harry was there, Draco wanted to touch and reassure him. He thought touch might be a sense that the cleansing couldn't twist as much. If he could hold Harry close and whisper into his ear, the way he had before...

He halted when something pressed against his chest. It was the blunt tip of a wand. Draco swallowed. *He*, at least, had no doubt about his perceptions in this room, especially since the rest of his senses were focused by being denied sight.

"Harry?" he whispered.

\*

*Is that Draco, or isn't it?*

Harry didn't know. Images raced through his mind as he strained his eyes into the blackness, trying to see the silver lines that had defined the beast once before. He could imagine the beast scratching out his eyes, biting his ears off, twisting its head to the side and breaking his neck. Wouldn't the house do that if it thought it was losing control of him?

*But it will only do that if I don't kill Draco first. That's what it's trying to do. Make me kill Draco.*

Harry's hand clenched and caught on his wand. He wanted to vomit. It would be easier to curl up in sickness than to do lots of other things, and then he could collapse to the floor, beneath the sweep of the paws or the groping hands. Maybe Draco would go by and leave him in the darkness, and that way, they might both survive until morning, when Kreacher would have to open the door of the ordeal room and let them out.

Then there came the voice of the creature again, or whatever it really was, whispering, choking. "Harry?" it said.

Harry knelt, the way he had imagined doing, but it was to lay his wand on the floor. He kept one hand pinioned over it, so he wouldn't lose it again, but he bowed his head and shivered. Then he licked his lips and raised his voice. There was the chance that Draco would hear him, even though Harry already knew he wouldn't hear himself. That was one source of the house's control over him. "Draco?"

Yes. Silence came out of his mouth. A scream clawed its way up Harry's throat, and he thought about giving it, about making the silence tremble and shatter, and then maybe his fate, whatever it was, would come for him sooner.

His Defense instincts raged and shrieked at him that he was giving up the advantage, just sitting there and waiting like an idiot for his death to approach him. But he held out his hand, and he fell

into trust. He hated the thought of killing Draco more than he hated the thought of being torn apart by the beast. That was the truth.

“Draco?” he repeated.

\*

*There he is!*

To be honest, though, Draco knew he probably wouldn't have found Harry if it hadn't been for the repetition of his name. The darkness confused him more than he would have thought possible, and the walls bounced the echoes of Harry's word in unpredictable directions. He groped and followed, and nearly fell over a pair of hunched shoulders. One quick feel up them found the freezing silver chain around Harry's neck.

Draco knelt down beside him, opening his arms to embrace Harry. “Yes, it's me,” he whispered. “I'm here. Please. Can you talk to me? Are you all right? Did it—did it wound you?” He had no idea whether Harry's soul would try to hurt him. There was so little they knew about this ordeal, and about what the house would try to keep its chosen heir.

Harry choked and turned, burying his face in Draco's chest. Draco closed his eyes in thankfulness when he felt the bristles of Harry's hair beneath his touch. There was no reason to close his eyes or keep them open, in a place like this, except that it was a private gesture of thanksgiving, one that the house could not force him to change.

“I'm all right,” Harry finally whispered. “It—it was making your voice sound like *that* thing's. I didn't know it was you at first. I just had to trust.”

Draco curled around him, trying to fill his hands with enough sensation that he could forget about the blackness around them, and his touch with enough tenderness that Harry would take comfort from it. He didn't know what to say. But perhaps his tongue and his teeth and his lips found the words before the rest of him did, because he whispered, “So—why didn't you strike? If you couldn't tell the difference between us?”

Harry turned in his arms. Draco could tell that much, but until their chins bumped, he didn't realize *which* way Harry had turned.

Then Harry's hands rose, and Draco shut his eyes again as they trailed over Draco's lips and nose and the pieces of hair that hung down next to his ears. “I didn't know the difference,” he whispered. “But I decided to trust. Because I could bear the thought of being torn apart by the beast if I was wrong, but I couldn't bear the thought of killing you, even by accident.”

Draco reacted before he thought. He kissed Harry, so hard that he felt someone's lip start bleeding. He couldn't even tell whose, he was so close, *they* were so close, pressed and touching, aching and moving against each other. He felt Harry lowering himself so that his back was against the floor of the ordeal room, and went with him, until he was crouching above Harry and still kissing him, threading his fingers into his hair.

Harry was gasping for breath by the time Draco pulled back. Draco found himself savagely glad of it. If he was doing that, then he was focusing on simple, physical things, not his soul and not dying.

“If you ever say that again,” Draco whispered, “I'll kiss you until your head spins.”

Harry's hands reached up and settled against his shoulders. "That doesn't make it much of a threat, you know," he whispered, with the first humor Draco had heard in his voice since they entered the house. "Why shouldn't I want something like that?"

"Because then I'll haul you to the Manor and lock you in," Draco said, his hands tightening reflexively. "And then you can explain to both my mother and I—both your heirs—why you don't care about your life."

"Not that," Harry whispered. "I just care more about you living than I care about my own life."

Draco bent down, dizzy again, and kissed Harry until it felt as if the blackness was inside his head as well as out, threatening to burst through his ears and eyes. Harry writhed beneath him, legs wide-spread and—and Draco had to think, had to decide that they were still in the middle of the ordeal and this wasn't a good idea, because it was obvious that Harry wouldn't be able to decide it for himself.

"No," Draco whispered savagely, drawing back and shaking his head. "I can't—I *won't* let you forget that. I won't let you forget that you feel something for me outside of what the Black blood and the Black house were influencing you to feel."

Harry gave a choke, as if that take on the situation hadn't occurred to him, and his hands became gasping and greedy. Draco rolled down on top of him again, more than willing to return to the kiss now that he'd had his say.

And no matter how he listened, he thought that he couldn't hear anything else coming near. Whether that creature Harry had seen existed or not, it wasn't here now.

"I wonder what the ordeal means, if what you saw wasn't really your soul," he murmured at last, when he drew back and released Harry from the kiss again.

"I've been thinking about that," Harry whispered. "And I thought—what if we were being too literal? Expecting to see an image of the soul? You notice that the description of the ordeal in the book didn't talk too much about that, even though there must be lots of people who went through it and could write down descriptions. Maybe—maybe I did see my soul. Maybe I learned what matters to me, and that's enough."

Draco shut his eyes. He could have spoken, but he didn't think that he had words to do the moment justice.

So he kissed Harry again, and they were still doing that when a door swung open somewhere behind them and a line of light pierced into the darkness.

## Into the Light

"What is Master Black doing on the floor?" Kreacher's voice, far from being shrill, was so quiet that Harry winced.

Draco's hand covered his for a moment, and then he pulled back and turned to face Kreacher with an expression that Harry had to admire, no matter how much he knew it would have driven him mad the year before. It was haughty and aristocratic, so tight that Kreacher could probably break his head on it, and pale with anger rather than fear.

"Have you any right to ask that?" Draco's voice lowered and gathered emphasis until Harry was surprised to realize that Draco was still on the floor with him, instead of on his feet and confronting the elf. "You aren't your master's ally or *servant*. Not when you knew that coming in here might kill him. Not when you sent him into the garden to commit a murder."

Kreacher's ears stood straight up on his head, and he stared at Draco as if he had never seen him before. "Master Black is knowing the consequences of being the Black heir," he muttered. "It is impossible *not* to be knowing the consequences."

"He knew that he would come here and see his soul," Draco said with deceptive mildness. "But he didn't know that the house would choose him, or what it would mean. He *wasn't raised in the wizarding world*."

"That is not being Kreacher's fault!" Kreacher threw up his hands.

"If someone is going to be to blamed, it's going to be you." Draco's voice lowered to an ominous hiss. "You were the only one who knew the full truth. You're the one who's going to take the blame."

Harry started. He had been so busy listening to the argument between Draco and Kreacher, which he had to admit was pretty entertaining, that he hadn't noticed Draco was maneuvering them closer and closer to the door. Kreacher seemed not to notice, either, but he had more excuse, since he was involved in the actual argument.

Draco shot Harry a smoldering glance. Harry blinked and then nodded. They were close enough now that they could probably dart through the door once Kreacher's attention was distracted.

Draco's hands closed around his forearm. Harry nodded one more time, and whirled to his feet, dashing for the door around the side of Kreacher, trusting that Draco would follow.

Kreacher spun towards him, shrieking with rage. His hands closed over the silver necklace he had bound around Harry's neck, and he yanked backwards so viciously that Harry went flying off his feet.

"Master Black is not to be leaving the Black house without an heir!" Kreacher yelled it into Harry's ear, clinging and pulling on the necklace until Harry couldn't breathe. "Master Black is becoming the next Black. And--"

Hands grabbed Harry's legs from outside the room and yanked, too. For a second, Harry thought he would tear in half, or at least his windpipe would, from the hellish pressure on it.

Then someone kicked Kreacher from the back, and Harry was free. He reared his head back long enough to take a breath and tear the necklace from his throat and revel in the fact that his heart was still pounding, and then flung himself into his friends' welcoming arms.

He turned back in time to see Kreacher whirl on Draco, his hands out and forming claws, his eyes and mouth so wide that he looked as if he would swallow Draco. Draco was lifting his wand, but Harry didn't know if he would raise it to a defensive position in time.

The black tide that rose inside Harry had nothing to do with the house, and everything to do with him. He raised his own wand.

"*Vincere!*" Harry shouted, and swept his wand down in a line so precise that he heard Ron whistle low in admiration behind him.

If the house hadn't given him the rage, it had given him the spell. Harry couldn't remember knowing it before, but it swept out from him and enveloped Kreacher in the midst of a cold black cone.

Kreacher shrieked again, but this time it didn't sound like he was about to devour Draco. His hands locked off to the sides, his head tilted back, and the sound coming from his throat grew smaller, a mouse's shrill squeak.

Harry blinked, and blinked again. Kreacher was actually *shrinking*. Harry hadn't known that it was possible with any spell; he supposed he had only known the spell in the same way that he had known the Legilimency necessary to read Draco's mind weeks ago. He grimaced a little about what Hermione would say if he told her he had used another spell he didn't know the origin or the meaning of.

When Kreacher was the size of an actual mouse, the shrinking stopped. Harry gestured vaguely towards his friends, and Hermione cast a spell that clapped a glass jar down over Kreacher.

Harry exhaled in relief and turned back towards Draco.

Draco was looking at him like...

In a way that Harry immediately wished wasn't in front of his friends, because he didn't want them to see it. A look that private should be reserved for him alone.

"Are you all right, Harry?" Hermione was fussing over him, her hands stroking the sides of Harry's neck in a way that made Draco's eyes shift to her and light up without much of a *friendly* gleam. Harry blushed and stood up, brushing off Hermione's hands when she would have reached for him again.

"I'm fine," he said. "And I'm naked. Can someone get me some clothes, please? And help Draco out of there?"

Ron, who seemed to have been coping with the fact of Harry's nakedness just fine up until now, suddenly flushed violently and tried to wrap Harry in the Invisibility Cloak. Harry reckoned that was the best he was going to get for right now, especially since all the clothes in the house had probably been worn by a dead Black, and wrapped the Cloak around himself, leaving only his head visible. Ron looked vastly relieved.

Harry turned to Draco. Hermione had her hand extended to help him, but Draco had disdained it, and walked out of the ordeal room on his own. His eyes were still on Harry, and that same deep smolder was in them. This time, Harry knew it wasn't any need to fool Kreacher or communicate the plan to him without speaking that made them do that.

"Thank you," Harry told him. "You saved my life." It was all he could say, in front of Ron and Hermione. He tried to make sure that his eyes contained all that he couldn't say, though, and Draco smiled and reached out, clasping his wrist and squeezing it.

"Take Kreacher with us," he told Hermione, who was looking at the glass jar with Kreacher under it with warring expressions on her face. "I have a theory about what part he played in this."

Hermione looked at Draco warily, as if thinking that he would try to execute Kreacher right there, but nodded and picked up the glass jar, following after them. As they moved through the corridors of the house, Harry took deep breaths. He didn't think it was his imagination that the brooding atmosphere had lessened, that the house had become somehow less threatening, less intelligent, and less awake in the short while since they had come out of the ordeal room.

And that meant, Harry thought, if he was right, that the house could go back to being dormant, the way it had been all those years while Sirius was in Azkaban and the house had no proper heir. It could just lie there and die. Eventually, Harry would have to figure out what to do with it, whether he could tame it, whether he wanted to keep Draco and Narcissa as his heirs, and all the rest of it.

Draco shot him a sideways glance and squeezed his wrist, correctly finding it even under the hang of the Invisibility Cloak.

*But not today.*

\*

"I think Kreacher was the representative of the house, the one that conveyed its will to its heir."

Draco sat comfortably at the table in the Gryffindor common room. It was several hours later, after Harry had had another bath to try and remove the effects of the hyssop, and got dressed again--that part, Draco could have done without--and the Gryffindors had sneaked Draco into their common room so that they could have a comfortable discussion without worrying about curfew. Draco wasn't worried about getting back to the Slytherin common room again, either. He would have an Invisibility Cloak with him when he chose to ask for it.

And something else, too, more than likely.

"I don't understand what that means." Granger stared at the small glass jar on the table, with Kreacher still using his wrists to hammer furiously on the sides. "Does that mean he was really the house's heir while it didn't have a human one?"

Draco paused, then inclined his head graciously. "That's nearer to the truth than I expected you to come," he murmured, and Granger flushed a little, looking as if she didn't know whether she should be pleased or not. "Yes. That's the best way to describe it. He looked for an heir, and looked for the way to bring the right heir into the equation at the right time. He offered himself as a convenient target, at times, so Harry could blame him and express that rage and hatred that the house desired in its heirs." He looked at Harry out of the corner of his eye, and Harry shook his head a little. So

he still hadn't told his friends he had tortured Kreacher, then. Well, Draco would leave that up to him to confess in his own time. "He hastened Harry's first kill. If Harry had spent more time in the house, he would have shown him more secrets, like the ordeal room, and attempted to entice him into using them. Luckily, Harry had the sense to leave the house."

Harry squeezed his hand. Harry's friends politely ignored both that and the look Draco could feel himself giving Harry in return.

"You've heard of these representatives before?" Granger asked.

Draco nodded. "They're rare, so I didn't think of the theory at first. But there was always the chance that a family line would be disrupted, or the true heir would be raised away from the house. So it made sense to connect the house to an object, or a living being, that would serve its will and had every reason to do so. When the heir came into contact with that object or that living being, then it would do what the house wanted."

"Kreacher didn't try to corrupt me when we were living in Grimmauld Place last year, though," Harry pointed out.

Draco smiled at him. "You weren't of age. The house could initiate its heirs before then, mostly, but not when someone wasn't of the blood and didn't live in it for an unbroken period of time. Last summer gave it the excuse it needed."

Granger looked a little ill. "And if you hadn't handled the ordeal the way you did..."

"Harry might have killed me," Draco said. He saw no reason to conceal *that* part from them. "And then the house would have had its insane heir, good and right impulses literally murdered."

He saw Weasley giving him a steady stare at the notion that *Draco* was the source of Harry's good and right impulses, and grinned.

"But what are you going to do with Kreacher, and about the house?" Granger asked Harry, still staring broodingly into the glass jar. "How can you..."

"I'm going to make the decisions later," Harry said roughly, and turned to Draco. "There's only one thing I want to do tonight. And Draco can help me with that."

Draco glanced back, letting his eyes show half-lidded, feeling his blood heat. He heard Weasley's disgusted exclamation, and Granger's chiding, but he didn't care. He wasn't the one who had to listen to them.

And Harry was doing a more than passable job of handling them.

All Draco had to do was lean back in his chair and wait for the moment when Harry was ready to go with him. And while his heart raced, waiting for it, his body felt perfectly poised, prepared.

*Is this what it's like to be in love?*



## Into the Shared

Harry crowded closer to Draco under the Invisibility Cloak as they made their way down towards the Slytherin dungeons. They could have stayed upstairs, he supposed, or found an abandoned classroom. But his friends were already disturbed by the notion of what they were going to do, and Harry didn't want to listen to their attempts to argue him out of it.

Not that he thought they *could*, given what he felt when Draco glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. But it was just easier this way. Draco said they could sneak back into the dungeons easily, and they would have more privacy in the room he shared with fewer boys, anyway.

Soon enough they reached the panel of sliding blank stone that Harry remembered, and Draco whispered the password. Harry could have caught it. He chose not to. He was admiring, instead, the curve of Draco's hip beneath his hand, and the curve of his arse.

And he could have thought of Kreacher and the house and what he was going to do with them both, but that didn't matter. It would come tomorrow, now that Harry knew he had a tomorrow to look forward to.

Draco closed his eyes and tossed his head back as the door slid open. Harry saw the emergence of his bright hair from under the Cloak, and managed to escort Draco inside just as the door snapped to again.

Draco turned on him, mouth open and eager, hands spread the way Kreacher's had been when he tried to hurt Draco in the ordeal room.

Harry shoved the memory away from him as hard as he could, thinking he heard it clang off something it hit in the far side of his skull, and opened his arms, driving Draco towards the stairs that he said led to his room.

They weren't going to make it to the bedroom, Harry decided. There were too many steps in the way, and too many clothes. He whipped off the Cloak and used his wand to raise a comprehensive Privacy Bubble around them. No one was in the common room, but anyone coming down the stairs wouldn't see them, this way.

"*Now*," he whispered against Draco's mouth, and leaned in to kiss him so hard that he doubted Draco had the breath to respond.

\*

*He fought for me. He would have been devastated to kill me.*

Maybe Draco shouldn't find that so arousing, but he had ceased to really apologize for his tastes a long time ago. The war, and the shame that followed it, had made him wonder if he *should* apologize for them, but no, he found when he considered the idea, he still thought the idea repugnant. And he didn't think Harry wanted him to apologize, either.

When he was bent backwards over the chair with Harry kissing his chest, and no idea where his shirt had gone, Draco couldn't find much reason to regret his choices, anyway.

Harry smiled up at him from between his legs, and opened his mouth. Draco gave a little thrust forwards, stepping only when he realized he still wore trousers and pants and trainers.

Harry, from the smile he gave Draco, didn't seem to care that much about the cloth. Indeed, since he was already reaching up to undo it with deft fingers, there was no reason to think it was a barrier.

Draco bent backwards and closed his eyes, his legs falling all the more open as he thought about what Harry had said in the ordeal room, the way he had looked after the bath with his skin shining, and how hotly he had kissed.

Draco moaned, and heard Harry echo him. He was glad of the reinforced Privacy Bubble around them; there was no way that he wanted someone coming down the stairs and hearing this while they were still wrapped around each other.

Harry's tongue gave his cock a tentative lick.

Draco started. He hadn't even fully comprehended that his trousers were open now and Harry could suck him. He opened his eyes and stared down, and Harry's gaze met his, bright and gleaming. Then he gave Draco another lick, and opened his mouth wide.

If he watched the moment when he entered Harry for the first time, Draco knew, he would come. So he shut his eyes, and if bliss consumed his body as Harry began to suck him, well, that was all right.

So were the helpless little murmurs he gave, and the way his hand fluttered above Harry's hair, and the way Harry managed to turn his head to the side, somehow, and get one of Draco's fingers in his mouth, too. He sucked so hard that Draco thought he would take the skin off.

That should not have sounded *or* felt so good. It didn't matter, though. Draco's body wanted what it wanted, and he was, by now, embarrassing himself with the gasping cries he uttered so much that he didn't have much room for any other kind of embarrassment.

Finally, he did permit himself to open one eye and glance down. Harry looked up from between his knees, his mouth full, his face full, too, but of challenge, and the wonder of doing this for the first time.

And Draco came.

Harry rode with it as easily as though he longed for it, something that Draco thought he might ask him about, someday, when his mind returned to him, and brought his ability to think in coherent thoughts with it. The pleasure burned through Draco, replacing the memories of Harry hurting him and the uncertainty about what Harry was really feeling and the terror Draco had felt in the ordeal room when he thought that he might lose Harry somewhere in the darkness and never find him again. *This* was enough to consume the whole of someone's world for a moment.

And set up the foundation of a different kind of world, one that would blossom in the future.

When Harry had drawn back and was licking his lips as if not sure whether he liked the taste or not, Draco caught his breath and bent down next to him. "That was *wonderful*," he purred. "Would you like to experience it?"

\*

Harry closed his eyes. Oh, that he *could*...

But his body ached so with need that he knew that he wasn't going to last long enough for Draco to give him half of what he'd given Draco. And that was okay. Harry intended to ensure they had enough chances for Draco to make up for any perceived slight or deprivation right now.

On the other hand, there were means of opening clothes without touching your cock. Harry grinned and picked up his wand, gesturing so that his trousers and pants slid down, arching outwards and not touching him. Draco stared with an interest so absorbed that it made Harry lie down on the floor of the common room and offer himself with much more confidence that he would have had otherwise.

"Half a minute is all I'm going to last," he said. "But you can make that a very *good*--"

He didn't even get to finish. Draco had slid down and fastened his mouth around Harry as if he had never wanted anything more.

Harry shouted and nearly kicked Draco in the head as his legs flew apart. His body was jerking compulsively, and Draco licked his lips and dived in, sucking him down so far that Harry thought for a second of the pain to Draco's throat, because Harry thought this was probably his first time giving a blowjob.

Then he could think of nothing but the pleasure.

Half a minute had been a generous estimate.

When he had poured himself out, and Draco had swallowed and looked smug, Harry drew him down into a kiss. Draco didn't object, lying lazily on his chest and kissing him until Harry's mouth swam with the salt and his head with the dizziness.

Then Draco drew back, looking at him with dark, serious eyes that made Harry swallow something that wasn't salt and pay attention.

"Do you think this can work?" Draco asked. "Without the house, and with everything that's between us in the past?"

Harry nodded a little. "It can work. But it'll be work. Labor," he added, when Draco raised his eyebrows. "I don't think we'll always get along, and I know I hurt you, and you don't get along with my friends."

He lifted his hands and framed Draco's face. Draco didn't smile, watching him intently.

"But I know I would rather have died than lose you," Harry said. "Rather than kill you myself, of course, but the beast of my soul leaping at you also told me that it's losing you *any* way. Maybe that's not love yet. But it's strong enough that I think we can make it work."

Draco smiled and leaned in. "And I think I've told you what it does to me, knowing that you value my life so much," he whispered.

Harry kissed him, and Draco kissed back, and the Privacy Bubble expanded around them as they

writhed on the floor, lost again in a darkness and heat that had everything to do with dim fires and the pleasure building in their minds, and nothing to do with the house.

*I'm so happy.*

That was worth any ordeal.

**The End.**

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